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# THE WHIRLIGIG OF TASTE

E. E. KELLETT

AUTHOR OF

"SUGGESTIONS, LITERARY ESSAYS," "A BOOK OF CAMBRIDGE VERSE,"

"THE PASSING OF SCYLD AND OTHER POEMS," "THE STORY OF MYTHS,"

"RECONSIDERATIONS," ETC.

L'homme éclairé suspend l'éloge et la censure :  
Il sait que sur les arts, les esprits, et les goûts,  
Le jugement d'un seul n'est point la loi de tous.



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE variations of literary opinion are as numerous and perplexing as those which Bossuet found among the Protestants, and arise from similar causes. There is the uncertainty about the standard of reference, and there is the difficulty of interpreting the standard when, if ever, it is found. Literary merit is a form of beauty, and—despite Burke—it is by no means demonstrated that absolute beauty exists: nor, if it does exist, is there any certainty in the application of the canon to particular cases.

Elsewhere I have said something about the general question. In the present little work I propose to deal with it historically, and to select, from the great mass of available material, a few specimens of the greater changes in literary taste which the world has seen. Only thus, in my opinion, is there any likelihood of finding something like a solid foundation amid the shifting sands of criticism.



# CONTENTS

LECTURE	PAGE
I. CAUSES OF VARIATION IN LITERARY TASTE .	9
II. PRIMITIVE CRITICISM . . . . .	29
III. LATIN CRITICISM . . . . .	49
IV. THE ELIZABETHANS . . . . .	66
V. THE CLASSICISTS . . . . .	81
VI. THE ROMANTICS . . . . .	106
VII. THE VICTORIANS . . . . .	128
CONCLUSION . . . . .	147



# THE WHIRLIGIG OF TASTE

## I

### CAUSES OF VARIATION IN LITERARY TASTE

THERE is a danger in accepting recorded opinion as invariably a true image of the actual character of an epoch. Many currents of thought and feeling run beneath the surface, never emerging into notice, and therefore escaping the observation of subsequent students: while many ideas are so much part and parcel of the atmosphere breathed by a whole generation that it never occurs to anyone to put them into words. They are silent, because taken for granted, and an historian, unless specially gifted with imagination, may miss them altogether. It is the abnormal that attracts attention, gets into the newspapers, fills the annals: the real life of the people flows on quietly. It is thus only, for instance, that we can explain the triumph of Christianity. One who reads the history of the early Church is tempted to imagine that her whole life was taken up with ferocious ecclesiastical and doctrinal quarrels. After a time it occurs to him that such a religion could never have overcome the

world; and he realises that there was a modest piety, a gentle power, working beneath the noise and turbulence. History records the destruction of Pompeii; it says nothing of the quiet life of thousands of provincial towns removed alike from the corruption of Rome and from the fury of Vesuvius. Our own age, if judged by records, will similarly seem more frantic and hectic than it is.

And so with æsthetic judgments. It is the loud voices that are heard, the startling paradoxes that win attention: and it needs a constant vigilance not to imagine that these were the real language of the time. Still, if we read with caution, we may gain *some* knowledge from the records—a knowledge the sounder the more clearly we recognise it to be imperfect. At times we may learn what haunts the depths of the Atlantic from seeing what floats on the top: and the records are at least evidence of *themselves*. Like an archæologist, therefore, who pieces out the story of a dead civilisation from the monuments it has left behind, we ask our readers to add a mental “perhaps” to our most confident conjectures, but we shall assume a rough correspondence between the actual facts and the scattered evidences that remain.

It is by no means always that a change in literary feeling is due to an impulse exclusively literary. Far more often, probably, the impulse starts in a region with which literature may seem to have nothing to do. Much of Kipling’s inspiration, for instance, comes from the vast growth of machinery: and yet it is unlikely that the inventors were romantically inclined. The poetry of Walt Whitman, which,

whatever we may think of it in itself, has been of enormous importance, sprang from the advance of a great stream of social life which might be regarded, with some justice, as the most materialistic the world has ever seen. History provides other illustrations on a still larger scale. No upheaval in modern times has produced a greater literary effect than the French Revolution; it is hardly too much to say that there is scarcely a passage of ten lines the tone of which does not reveal to a competent critic whether it was written after that great event or before it. Burke, Chateaubriand, Madame de Staël—these were transformed by it: Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, were made by it. Yet the Revolution was in its origin social, economical, or political—anything you will, except literary. Few of the members of the National Assembly, and assuredly none of the mob that captured the Bastille, thought of inventing a new style. But, as it was impossible for so great a social metamorphosis to take place without stirring every part of men's nature, it was inevitable that, crying out for new modes of government, they should cry out also for new forms of literature and receive what they wanted. They received, of course, both bad and good. It was a poor exchange that gave France the rants of Barère for the orations of Bourdaloue; nor is the style of Sieyès comparable with that of Voltaire. But bad or good it was adapted to the times. There are those who prefer the manner of the Burke of 1776 to the manner of the Burke of 1790 and 1795. But the *Reflections* exactly hit the taste of the time at which it appeared. Men had changed, and the

style they wrote, as well as the style they desired to read, changed with them.

Thus some of the greatest developments of literature may be traced to great political events. It was as impossible for the Elizabethans, after 1588, to rest content with the works that had satisfied their fathers, as for the Athenians after Salamis to rest content with the drama of Thespis and Phrynichus: the Armada called a Spenser and a Shakespeare into existence, as the defeat of Xerxes inspired an Æschylus and a Sophocles. The *Faerie Queene* appeared two years after the repulse of the great danger; and a story—*ben trovato* if not true—relates that Æschylus fought at Salamis, that Sophocles was one of the chorus of youths that chanted the thanksgiving, and that Euripides was born on the very day of the battle. *Post hoc* is not *propter hoc*; but a just instinct sees in the mighty political advance the cause of the mighty poetical outburst. Conversely, when Athens had lost her old supremacy, the old drama was displaced by the New Comedy; Menander substituted for the old heroic plays a quieter and more domestic stage: imperial greatness begets an imperial muse, and a circumscribed domain a less ambitious poetry.

Similarly, while freedom has one literature, despotism has another. There is an obvious difference of tone between Lucretius and Catullus on the one hand, and Virgil and Horace on the other. Not merely in subject or in a certain recklessness, but in style and manner, are the poets of the Republic marked off from those of the Empire. The Republican ease and liberty sometimes degenerates



into licence and carelessness; the Augustan regularity is sometimes slavish and over-refined. In the same way, the poets of the age of Louis XIV, always conscious that they have a master, show an increasing submissiveness to rule and measure. Some freedom—call it laxity if you will—remains to Corneille and Molière; less to Racine, and little indeed to Boileau. Men had to wait till the death of the *Roi Soleil* for literature, like manners, to gain some ease of movement.

So, too, a great advance in science, though nothing could at first sight seem less poetical, inevitably results in a change both in the style and in the substance of poetry, as well as in the taste that judges it. A whole book might be written on the influence of Copernicus on poetic production, and another on poetry as modified by Darwin. *In Memoriam*, for instance, though written before the *Origin of Species*, is full of the thoughts which were soon to be clarified by that work, and could never have been written had not the *Vestiges of Creation* appeared shortly before: while, though Milton still hankered after the Ptolemaic cosmogony, *Paradise Lost* is in part the work of Galileo and Kepler. It is hard—if we may leap to a later date—to imagine the loss the literature of Germany and the world would have sustained if Goethe had not been a student of science. *Faust* is informed throughout by the new scientific spirit, alike in its doubts and in its certainties; the philosopher is the physicist of the early nineteenth century, and Mephistopheles is the darker aspect of the same philosophy. Herder, Schiller, Richter, and in a lesser degree their English

contemporaries, are products of the same eager, sanguine, and yet weary and disappointed age. We see in all alike, in their vocabulary, their metaphors, their manner, something which we should seek in vain in their predecessors. Nothing lives to itself, and nothing dies to itself.

It is probable that few, even among poets, have been less keenly interested in science than Shakespeare. Most, even of his natural history, is borrowed from books: he chooses, for instance, to take his description of the horse from Du Bartas rather than to look at the animal for himself: and his account of the bees he drew from Lyly and Elyot. It is well known that there is no allusion to Copernicus in his plays or poems. And yet even he could not help being influenced by the curiosity around him: many of his metaphors are drawn from the crude science of the time. "Doubt that the stars are fire," says Hamlet in his love-poem; and in Shakespeare's day, as we learn from Bacon and others, many people *were* doubting it. Unquestionably Shakespeare must often have listened to discussions on cycles, on earth-changes, on diseases and humours; these are all reflected more or less accurately in his verse. The Sonnets, as has been often observed, are full of this kind of philosophy: Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, wondered whether Time is not endlessly repeating itself; and he was struck with the constant interchange between sea and land, which was to him a type of the cyclic history of time. He watches at times "the hungry ocean gain advantage on the kingdom of the shore," and at others sees "the beachy girdle too wide for Neptune's

hips"; he thinks of mountains melting to plains, and plains rising into mountains, of continents, weary of solid firmness, dissolving into seas. He reflects on medical theories, and wonders whether the stars above us, or humours within us, govern our bodily conditions.

Still more interesting are the traces of the rise of a more or less shadowy science of politics. Men were beginning to think of the world, not merely as either an animal with a soul, or a body of matter without one, but as the abode of intelligent social creatures; and they were beginning to discuss theories of government. Books like Elyot's *Governour* and Sir John Cheke's *Hurt of Sedition*, still remain to show how statesmen and learned men thought on this subject: but we cannot doubt that, in days when Elizabeth's title was disputed by half of one nation, Henry IV's by half of another, and Philip II's by the whole of a third, men reflected upon sovereignty and subjection. Shakespeare was certainly not a keen politician; yet even he cannot keep the question out of his plays. His ideas are more or less clearly hinted in the Lancastrian dramas, while in *Troilus* and (if that be his) *Sir Thomas More*, he puts into the mouth of men represented as wise the views of Elyot and Cheke. We are thus prepared for the great outburst of political theorising which was to come in the next age, amid which, it is true, the Elizabethan view will appear slavish and antiquated, but which, like all great movements, was born of forces that were already at work a generation before they emerged into light. More or less consciously, in this as in other ways, the

Elizabethan writers expressed a subterranean impulse of their times; and in this as in other ways they mark an advance upon the preceding age.

Allied with scientific advance, and often indeed a condition of it, is an increase in geographical knowledge. We can trace the effect of such an increase in the poetry of the Hebrews; and there can be little doubt that travellers' tales, with their suggestions of a vast unknown world beyond the Greek ken, were an inspiration to the author of the *Odyssey*. We smile at the strange confusions of north and south, east and west, in the descriptions of Io's wanderings; but who can help seeing, in these very errors, proofs that the imagination of Æschylus had been stirred by conversations with some Persian or Scythian prisoner from the hordes of Xerxes? Of the impulse given to Spenser and Shakespeare by the "new maps with the augmentation of the Indies" it is hardly necessary to speak: the "Fairy Land" is, in its general outline and in many of its details, but a transcript of an explorer's account of El Dorado, and the magic island of the *Tempest* comes direct from a sailor's log.

No later discoveries have equalled these in interest: but it is safe to say that every extension of geographical science has led to a corresponding gain in the width and comprehensiveness of literature. Our missionaries, our merchants, our colonists have not only written themselves of what they have seen and done, but have insensibly impressed themselves upon the writers left at home. Not only have we a Canadian, an Australian, an African, an Alaskan school of writers, but almost every English writer

has felt the breath of Canada, Australia, or Alaska, and writes with a certain cosmopolitan tone which by itself would date his work. We ask, and we receive, more from our authors than we had either the right, or the imagination, to ask half a century ago.

But after all, changes in literary taste arise also, as is natural, from literary causes. The discovery, if we may use the term, of a new language often revolutionises the minds of the discoverers. "When I learn a new language," said the Emperor Charles V, "I seem to have gained a new soul." So it is with nations, and perhaps to a greater degree. Of this the most striking illustration is the subjection of victorious Rome to conquered Greece, a subjection so complete that the native literature of the victors was either driven underground or suppressed entirely. No sooner had the Romans perceived that Greece had a literary culture, than they yielded themselves up to it, contemned, sometimes extravagantly, their own models, and slavishly imitated the new. Their plays were but adaptations from Menander and Diphilus, their epics centos from Homer, their elegies mimicries of Callimachus and Philetas. Nay, they actually to some extent altered the very inflections of their nouns and adverbs to suit the new development. Their poets and critics judged everything not in itself, but by relation to an Hellenic standard; and an ode or an elegy was praised or censured according as it recalled a Greek original. Whatever may now be thought of this astonishing phenomenon, it is pretty certain that it involved a certain injustice to the old literature:

and, of all the devastations wrought by Time, few are more to be regretted than the loss of the native Latin poetry. We can form some conjecture as to the greatness of that loss by thinking of what we should have missed if all Anglo-Saxon literature had been suppressed by the influence of Chaucer, and if we had known nothing of our old ballads except what we could guess from the parody in *Sir Thopas*. Chaucer is good, but *Beowulf* and *Sir Isumbras* have their merit also. Horace and Virgil we do not depreciate when we say we would give the *Epodes* and the last book of the *Æneid* for some of the despised earlier poems.

Fifty years, or thereabouts, after Chaucer, another "discovery" brought to a head a movement which had begun in his own time. That great stir of mind which is comprehensively known as the Renaissance metamorphosed, for good or ill, critical taste throughout Europe. Every month, we may almost say, unearthed some ancient manuscript, and every manuscript was copied, studied, and made a model. The discovery, in particular, by Poggio of the *Annals* of Tacitus made a sensation like that of the Gospel of Peter four hundred years later. But lost works of Cicero and others were constantly coming to light; and the result was that exaggerated *Ciceronianism* which Erasmus found it necessary to combat with all his learning and ridicule. Finally, the whole edifice was crowned by the rediscovery of Greek: and the invention of printing put all these ancient novelties at the disposal of thousands of students. For a long time, as was inevitable, everything Greek was good: there was neither the wish nor the

capacity to discriminate. What was more unfortunate, everything that was not classical was bad. It was long before men began to distinguish among their treasures, and to mark off the gold from the dross. Bentley, for example, as late as 1739, thought highly of Manilius. He would assuredly not have thought highly of an English poet of the same rank.

We may find something similar in the literary history of Germany. Till the middle of the eighteenth century the prevailing tone was French and "classical": but when, through the exertions of Lessing and his followers, a knowledge of Shakespeare was introduced to the German nation, the taste changed. Here, it is true, the change did not come about insensibly or, as we may express it, naturally: it was, in a sense, imposed upon the people by a few men of great reputation, and was largely a matter of argument rather than of feeling: but, once established, it became in its turn an accepted dogma, and was held without reasoning by whole crowds who would have rejected it equally irrationally a few years before. The *Laokoon* and the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* convinced the leaders of thought, and the doctrines inculcated in these works were by those leaders passed on to the multitude. As usual, the movement tended to exaggeration; and many of the German works of art produced under its influence were wild in design and bombastic in language: a little of the despised "classicism" would have done them no harm.

The debt of Germany to England was amply repaid. All students of English literature know what an immense force was exerted upon that literature in the

early years of the nineteenth century. Coleridge, De Quincey, Taylor of Norwich, and above all Carlyle, not only fell under the spell of Herder, Richter, Goethe, Schiller, but spent no little of their energy in making the writings of these great men familiar to Englishmen. The effect was prodigious, and has probably not even yet exhausted itself. It extended far beyond the sphere of pure literature, more especially into the domains of science, history, philosophy, and theology: nor is it by any means certain that, with all the benefits it has conferred upon us, it has not done a certain amount of harm as well.

Next, we may notice the immense recent growth of interest in other foreign literatures. Of late years the press has teemed with versions of Norwegian, Russian, Swedish, Dutch, and even Chinese works; many of which have been deservedly popular, and the study of which has unquestionably broadened and deepened our literary sense. One need but mention the enormous influence of Ibsen upon our drama, or of Tolstoy, Dostoieffsky, and Tourguéneff upon our novels; but a thousand other examples could easily be given. England, as we saw during the War, is no longer an island: but the foreign writer has invaded us in far greater numbers, and produced a far more devastating effect, than all the Zeppelins and aeroplanes. What is almost equally important, we have translated foreign books of criticism, and enjoy the inestimable advantage of seeing what our neighbours think of us. There may be much, for instance, in Brandes that is wrong-headed; but that does not materially diminish the



value of his judgments for his English readers. Such competent foreigners are stimulating even when most perverse.

But there are yet other causes of these changes of standards, some, perhaps, even more powerful. First, perhaps, we may place the fact that a style, or a school, being human, tends to wear itself out like all other human things. Empires, it is said, have their rise, their climacteric, and their decay. Whatever be the case with material domination, this is certainly true of domination in the world of literature. What once was fresh, grows old: what once was irresistibly attractive, attracts no more: and this simply by a law of nature; we need, in many cases, seek for no other cause. There was no other reason, so far as we can see, why the Elizabethan literature should decay, or why the heroic couplet should now be dead. Both died simply of old age. And too often those who have seen these schools merely in their decrepitude are inclined to despise their youth and manhood, and to fancy there was never any real life in them. It takes more imagination than most men habitually exercise to perceive that the tottering Shallow was once an athletic hero; and it takes labour and historic sense to recognise that a style now decrepit was once full of vigour.

Again, it is natural to men to scan with sceptical eyes the pictures of earlier days drawn by their fathers. Precisely as the old man is *laudator temporis acti*, so his son is a contemner of the past—too often indeed a contemner of his father as a portion of the past. A Dickens sees in his father

materials for a Mr Micawber; and it has been observed that Shakespeare, at least in his early plays, draws very unflattering portraits of old men: nay, some have fancied that in the discourses of Polonius we may have irreverent parodies of the lectures of Mr John Shakespeare to his son. Be this as it may, the younger generation, conscious that it is somewhat misjudged by the elder, proceeds in turn to misjudge the censor, and is more than slow to receive the established opinion as gospel, until the boy in turn suddenly awakes to find that he too, if not old, is thought so, and that a yet younger generation is criticising *him*. We need look no further than this common tendency for an explanation of many a complete revolution in opinion, politics, or literary feeling: it is enough that a view has been held for the opposite to be held afterwards. No generation can escape this somewhat cruel scrutiny on the part of its successor. It matters not that we may have made a real advance on what went before us; it matters not that our age may have been, in genius and accomplishment, the greatest age in history. The age following stays not to compare us with our predecessors, or to mark from whence we started and where we left off: fixing its eyes solely on real or imaginary defects, it passes the inexorable sentence. Thus it was that the nineteenth century judged the eighteenth, never troubling to calculate how far it had improved on the seventeenth; and thus it is that now the Georgians are appraising the Victorians. Too lazy to study the world as it was in 1830, and to measure the distance traversed between that date and 1900,

too careless to consider the difficulties overcome or the evils vanquished, these casual critics appraise the men of Victoria's age not by their stupendous achievements, but by what was left undone; nay, more unfairly still, by a comparison with themselves—forgetting entirely that they would not be themselves at all but for their fathers' exertions, and forgetting also that their opinion of themselves is not unlikely to be somewhat too favourable. As a result, they are often inclined to imagine a work to be good simply because it is not like one their fathers would have admired. A new "poet" arises: he is at any rate not like Tennyson, and if he has no other merit, *that* shall be reckoned in his favour. But the whirligig of time brings in its revenges; already a later Georgian school is beginning to emerge, to which both Tennyson and the earlier Georgian poet are equally antediluvian, and which is not sure that of the two effete styles that of Tennyson is not, after all, the less offensive.

To some extent—so various is human nature—this tendency is, if not corrected, yet at least crossed and contradicted, by an opposite tendency—that which sees all the faults of the present and idealises the past. It was thus that Demosthenes looked on his contemporaries, and contrasted them with the men of Marathon: and it was thus that Morris and the other romanticists idealised the Middle Ages. There are, among these unhistorically-minded people, a few who idealise even the generation of the immediate past, and contrive to honour even their fathers and their mothers. But these are indeed few: it is generally safer to apply idealism to

an age that is imperfectly known, and from which no living witnesses can be summoned to tell the truth. Still, these worshippers of the dead do something to mitigate the self-complacency of the present, and to insinuate a doubt whether an age is after all quite the best merely because it is the latest. And their doubts add yet another to those variations and shiftings of opinion which might tempt a lay Bossuet to write a three-volume treatise upon the inexhaustible theme.

But, while thus there is this eternal supersession of the fathers by the sons, while age is for ever censorious of youth, and the children are for ever saying to the parents, like Falstaff to the Chief Justice, "You that are old consider not the capacities of us that are young," there is one other element in change which is perhaps equally pervasive—the mere, unadulterated, Athenian love of the new: the passion for change as change. The world is like Orsino—two repetitions of a tune are enough for it. Sometimes, like Orsino, it also likes to have the new in the form of some old and antique song; but the song must be antique enough to have all the charm of novelty. We may feel that the novelty is not as good, in reality, as the old: but at any rate it is different, and that is enough. There is an attraction in a new philosophy, though we may be uneasily conscious that it is false; in a new romance, though we know it to be bad; in a new lilt, though it be jerky and rough. And many a style of writing has gained vogue simply and solely because it is not that to which we have been accustomed. One has but to advertise one's nostrums as "modern," one's

theories as "the most recent," to gain them at least a momentary reception; and the most conservative Areopagus will hear you, at least once, provided you are imagined to be a setter-forth of strange gods. The hero of yesterday is forgotten: Time, like the host in *Troilus and Cressida*, slightly shakes the parting guest by the hand, and, with his arms outstretched as he would fly, grasps in the comer.

Allied with this is a characteristic of human psychology for which, as there is no single English word, I may invent a Greek one—*alopecuria*, the habit of the fox that has lost his tail. An illustration may make this clear. In my youth there were two or three great orators who had the full power of working fearlessly up to a climax, straining the resources of passion to the utmost, and finally carrying their audiences away with them in a crashing torrent of eloquence. I have seen audiences absolutely beside themselves under the spells of such magicians: all but literally hanging on their words, hushed into silence, moved to tears, roused to fury, charmed into emptying their pockets. But it is plain that if such effects are to be achieved, everything must be absolutely right. As in Bright's great speech on the Angel of Death, not a word, not an intonation, must ring in the slightest degree false. It is given to very few to have this power. And—such is the perversity of men—those who try to attain it and fail will inevitably depreciate it. The age of the great orators is succeeded by that of their imitators, who make a sad business of it, and they by men who call the whole thing false because its practitioners are poor. Thus arises a school of

speakers who shun "oratory" like the plague, because they are uneasily conscious they can never attain to it, and proudly assert that their quiet style is after all better than the "flamboyance" of their fathers. Out of their necessity they try to make a gain. Similarly, the flat and smooth successors of Hooker, Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, unable to reach the old heights, invented a criticism to correspond with their lower practice. Something of the same kind has occurred in England in the realm of poetry. There is every reason to think that the recent cult of unmusicality is largely due to the inability of our "poets" to be musical. They have therefore turned harshness into a virtue, and, like the tailless fox, vaunted their defect as a merit.

The consideration of such facts as these suggests that one corrective to hasty judgments is the cultivation of a sound historic sense. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*; and it is certain that the more we learn about our ancestors the less we shall be inclined to criticise them harshly. In every case, probably, it will be found that the sweeping censures passed on literary schools by those which displaced them, were based on an insufficient study of their *whole* history. The "Romantics" were repelled by the Classicists, as the Classicists were repelled by the Elizabethans, because they did not consider in what circumstances these schools arose, what needs they were created to meet, and how far they had met those needs. That Pope and Dryden did not satisfy the men of 1798 was true enough, and it was still truer that the Hayleys and the Whiteheads were unsatisfactory. But a comprehensive and en-

lightened criticism would not have judged Pope by Hayley, and would have recognised that Pope *did* satisfy the men of 1730. It would have at once concluded that Pope must have had enormous powers, and would have sought, by an impartial *historic* investigation, to discover what those powers were. It would have seen that it was as ludicrous to judge him by the demands of the Revolutionary epoch as to judge the science of Harvey by that of Hunter. You have no right to expect a man to write for a century later than himself. The question solely is, whether he has served his own generation. Nor is it any argument to the contrary that some great men, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, transcend the centuries. These men speak to us because, in the first instance, they spoke to their own audiences. They were like the ancient prophets, who, addressing the Jews of the Captivity, have by virtue of their genius, uttered words of consolation or reproof to a hundred ages. But had they neglected their own countrymen, and spoken for us, it is certain they would have been unheard by us. Putting their whole energies into the task of appealing to those nearest, they have made their voices, without intending it, audible to those far off.

Thus we come back simply to this, that literary taste, like every other human faculty, is the creature of the age, circumscribed by its limitations, stirred by its passions, warped by its defects. It cannot be taken in isolation from the man as a whole. It springs from the soil in which he is born, it breathes the air he breathes, and lives on the food he eats. Like opinion, it alters as we cross the Pyrenees, and

like disease, it flourishes in one climate and decays in another. But it cannot too often be repeated that there is, in the strict sense, no spirit of the age. Each man absorbs from his environment something special to himself, and in turn gives back to it something that no other gives. In every age there are many who might seem to belong properly to another, men born out of due time, either too soon or too late. What we call the spirit of the age is a phantasm, a sum attained by a rough and clumsy integration of infinitely small expressions, a delusive and casual composite photograph, a mixture from which multitudes of essential ingredients are inevitably omitted. On such a theme it is impossible to dogmatise: every student, selecting his own materials, will form his own conclusions, and, if wise, will remember that those conclusions, like those of former generations, are conditioned by his own environment.

It will now be our business, with due caution and full recognition of liability to error, to illustrate these positions by a more detailed study.



## II

### PRIMITIVE CRITICISM

VERSE being so much earlier than prose, and art being so much earlier than criticism, we are reduced to conjecture when we try to deal with the primitive changes in literary taste. It would be interesting, for example, if we had some record of the arguments and battles that attended the advances made from the crude verses of a Jubal to the more elaborate stanzas of a more exacting age: but no such record remains. It is tolerably certain that in most nations, if not in all, the earliest poetry deserving of the name was short, pithy, and pointed—perhaps at most three or four lines, each with not more than four vigorous beats. Such a poem is the ditty of Samson commemorating his victory at Lehi, the point in which is reinforced by puns of a very clumsy character. The retort of the Philistines after his capture borrows a corresponding strength from rude rhymes. Such verses, blunt, brief, and direct, were easily remembered; they passed rapidly from mouth to mouth, and became part and parcel of the traditionary lore of the people. It was thus that many events even in Scottish history were kept in mind. “Beware, Montagow, for farrow shall thy sow” preserved the memory of Black Agnes’s defence of Dunbar in the popular mind more surely than

learned histories could have done: and "Robert Graeme, God give him shame" made the murderer of James I eternally infamous.

Alongside of these, and probably quite as old, were proverbs, maxims, and sententious sayings, packed into a couple of lines, and scattered by handfuls among the tribesmen of the sage who made them. A few, probably, of those ascribed to Solomon are of this very primitive origin; and all of them, however late, and however deliberately fashioned, retain that early form. All of them, to gain a vogue, had to be in verse, and many, doubtless, lie *perdus* in later poems. It is hard, for instance, to believe that there are not in Homer and Hesiod many scores of such proverbial sayings. Every literature has them in abundance; there are two separate collections of them in old English manuscripts, and many—tied together in various ways—in Icelandic.

By what steps men advanced from these crude efforts to longer poems we cannot tell; but it would seem likely that the next stage was that of the ballad, half narrative, half song, in which some exploit was more fully commemorated than it could have been in a line or a couplet. Lamech, for instance, thus commemorated a deed of his own. A flatterer of Sihon, King of the Amorites, thus praised his victory over Moab, and his verses, being vigorous and striking, were remembered even when Sihon had in his turn gone down before Israel. We can dimly gather that the new taste often demanded music as well as words; and it would seem that a refrain became, if not an essential, yet a welcome element in such poems. Whether the older men

thought these advances meretricious or desirable, we are not told: though, human nature being what it is, we can be pretty sure that the chief himself did not object to a certain prolixity of praise. But even the ballad did not satisfy all people at all times. Later, the more cultivated hearers wearied of it, and demanded something more finished. Instead of a few lines or stanzas, they asked for a long narrative, and instead of one brief and sharp line, they asked (in Greece at least) for the long hexameter, which might at first sight seem but a juggling alteration of name, but which in reality was something far more important. The introduction of six beats instead of three meant the possibility of a variation in the pause, and thus greater harmony; it meant also a far greater range of effect. How long it took to establish this change, and what passions were aroused during the process, we cannot tell; but, simple as it was, it may well have led to conflicts as fierce as those which were seen in the musical world when chromatic harmonies began to intrude upon the old diatonics. Certain it is that it was not the matter of a moment. It is obvious enough that "Homer" was far from being the originator of the style associated with his name. Everything goes to show that his poems are simply the crown of a very long development: they reveal a skill in versification, a mastery of poetic device, and a command of a highly specialised vocabulary, which can have been attained only by the combined labours of many generations. The old fancy, to which even Freeman lent credence, that Homer's images, metaphors, similes, and other adornments, are all his own and

unborrowed, is now for ever discredited. "When he smote his lyre, he had heard men sing, and took what he required." No genius can make an instrument, perfect it, and then use it to perfection: the highest powers are but those which use best an instrument made by others, and imperfectly wielded by feebler men. Having found the instrument, the great poets employed it for finer ends than the mere direct praise of a lord: they sang of greater themes, and eulogised a chief, as Pindar did later, by chanting the great deeds, not of the chief himself, but of his ancestors.

Once formed, this style—and no wonder, considering the genius of its exponents—held its ground for a long while; it gained an immense prestige, and the most original poets were content to exercise their originality without overstepping its limits. They tried, so far as we know, no new measures—the hexameter was enough for them; and they ventured on no new modes of speech. Homer had shown how to express anything that came into their thoughts. Not merely the epics, but the gnomic and reflective poems, like those of Hesiod, and the political pamphlets, like those of Solon, spoke the language, and used the form, of the old court poets. The so-called "Hymns" in praise of the gods were sufficiently in the Homeric style to be ascribed to Homer himself. We cannot be sure whether the parodies on the style, like the *Margites* and the *Battle of the Frogs and the Mice*, indicate a certain impatience with the *genre*; but impatience, if it existed at all, was assuredly not widely felt.

Time, however, like steel, overthrows all things. A change, hastened perhaps by some great political calamity, such as the subjugation of the Achæans by the Dorians, or possibly coming merely as the natural result of satiety, led men to ask again for something new, to doubt whether the epic could express everything, or whether Homer, though the greatest, was the only poet. It would seem, from the fragments we possess, that "Arctinus," "Lesches," "Eugammon," and the cyclic poets generally, were vastly inferior to their master. At any rate, the epic, like the Elizabethan drama twenty centuries later, wore itself out. New subjects clamoured for poetical expression. It struck men of genius that their own experiences and thoughts, their own loves and hates,<sup>1</sup> even their own failings, were quite as well worth celebrating in verse as the deeds of ancient heroes. Thus we find an Archilochus inventing or employing the "elegiac" to tell of his own cowardice on the field of battle. The same poet, searching for a vehicle to convey his savage hatred of Lycambes, hits on a measure which, as Aristotle tells us, is but a little removed from plain prose or the rhythm of talk—the so-called "iambic." The use of such a measure must have indeed startled his contemporaries; but it probably lent a verisimilitude to his invectives which could have been gained in no other way: it may have had something of the effect of Butler's doggerel or Byron's deliberate passages of bathos. At the same time Callinus, either borrowing from Archilochus or himself inventing, used the

<sup>1</sup> "Plus in amore valet Mimnermi versus Homero," says Propertius; and these old poets felt it also.

elegy to stir his countrymen to deeds of valour against an enemy actually at the gates; and we can believe that the pointed couplet had, at the time, more force than the rolling but long-winded hexameter. How the conservatives would shake their heads over these innovations, "well may we guess, but cannot tell."

Somewhat later, a Sappho and an Alcæus developed yet a new form of poetry—the lyric—in which, while wider themes were not neglected, yet personal emotion was put into song, and new metres were created for the purpose. From this, it was no long step to the ode, or court-lyric, in which more elaborate music was called in, and in which, at least ostensibly, the great deeds of the patron were duly extolled. A formal chorus chanted these strains, and marked the measures by the beat of a dance. For such odes the poet expected, and received, a considerable reward, precisely as the rhapsodists had received rewards for their epic celebrations of a chief's ancestors; but the style of the panegyric was altogether different; and the change was due to the growth of music, the emergence of monetary wealth, and the consequent increase of display. A plausible theory has seen the cause of the rise of the tyrants in the sudden rise of a coinage: tyranny was a form of plutocracy. Whether this was so or not, all despots have seen the value of pageant and show in impressing the multitude and strengthening their prestige; and the tyrants thought money well spent that was bestowed on a well-equipped chorus and an eloquent poet. Odes of this kind are rarely found in democracies, and, if found at all, are

dedicated more often to the praise of gods than to the flattery of men.

In every country in which men of wealth and power are to be seen, poetry of something like this kind arises by a natural law, though it may be less complicated than the poetry which was sung before Hiero. At the court of Athelstan, as all remember, there was a bard to sing the glories of Brunanburh; and the hint at the beginning of his ode—that the King was a “bracelet-bestower”—was not inserted for nothing. At the end of the song, the “scop” expected a gift of gold, and rarely was he disappointed. At the small courts of the Icelandic chiefs the poetry of panegyric took a very remarkable form, in which the flattery was strangely subtle. From about 1200 onwards, the Icelandic court-verse consisted of a series of conundrums or “kennings.” Nothing was described by its proper name, and the hearer had to guess what was meant. The chief, of course, was designated by some periphrasis denoting that he had plenty of gold, and was generous in parting with it—especially to poets. He was “the despiser of the flame of the street of the hawk”: the street of the hawk being the hand, and its flame a bracelet or ring. Or, more plainly, he was “the giver of rings.” An arrow was “the gnat of the bone”; war or battle “the storm of Odin”; gold was “Grani’s burden,” with an allusion to the horse of Sigurd which carried off the treasure of Fafnir; and so on *ad infinitum*. When the chief had unravelled this tangle, he invariably found its meaning to be that he, the chief, had done prodigies of valour in some great fight, and that the bard wanted payment for his eulogy. Thus

the great man had a double gratification—that of listening to his own praise, and the more subtle one that comes to those who solve a cross-word puzzle. He was, in fact, in the position of James I, when his courtiers brought to him the riddling epistle about the Gunpowder Plot. He alone could find out the answer.

It may seem a far-fetched comparison that we have been drawing between the early Greeks and the medieval Scandinavians; and the differences are indeed obvious enough. Yet both alike show the results on poetry of the formation of a guild or school of poets. In all such schools, whether of prophets, priests, or bards, the almost inevitable tendency is to formulate a code of laws, rigid and precise, to the destruction of the soul. The letter that kills is preferred to the spirit that gives life. Even among the Homeridæ, who were a school of rhapsodists, we can find traces of great monotony in phraseology, in arrangement, in general style. As we proceed, we shall light on many other examples of this tendency to tyranny on the one hand and slavish obedience on the other. Nor are we even yet free from the danger of a preference of the obscure to the direct, the complicated to the simple, and the abstract to the concrete—all marks of viciousness in taste, and provoking, sooner or later, a reaction which often goes too far in the opposite direction. That love of the perverse and quaint which led the author of Ecclesiastes to conclude his work with a series of obscure “kennings,” will meet us in every literature at one period or another, and recurs with the regularity of the plague in a medieval city.



With the introduction of new *genres* of poetry, there was even a danger that the old epic might be entirely lost. The vastly larger portion, indeed, did actually perish: of the *Thebaid* we possess very few lines, and of the "Cyclics" hardly more. It was the action of Athens, or perhaps of a few Athenians, that, by selecting from the mass that part which is specially called "Homer," saved for us the two greatest epics of the ancient world. It was the recitation of these two at the Panathenæa that kept them alive; and it was perhaps the forethought of Pisistratus in reducing them to writing that prolonged their existence to our own day. And yet it was Athens that originated an entirely new class of poetry, which in the opinion of Aristotle was in itself higher than the epic—that is, the Athenian tragic drama. So far as we can perceive, the view of Aristotle was, not that Æschylus and Sophocles were greater poets than Homer, but that, had they possessed his genius, they would have risen higher. Or, to put it in another way, had Homer been a tragic poet, his tragedies would have been greater than the *Iliad*. Potentially, tragedy is superior to epic, whatever it may be in actual fact. "Tragedy," says Aristotle, "is superior because it includes all the epic elements and more; in addition to metre it has music, scenery, and greater concentration. It appeals more powerfully to the more educated among its audience than the epic; and it produces its own proper effect with less dilution."

In these words we can see the evidence of a controversy which, carried on with Athenian garrulity, may well have been vigorous and prolonged, but

which, being largely confined to oral argument, has left scarcely any traces behind. Unlike the coffee-house discussions of the later Stuart period, which found their expression in print as well as in speech, these debates have been forgotten: but we can well imagine them to have been eager and impassioned. The supporters of the epic had the great advantage that the supreme position of Homer was absolute and unquestioned; it was easy, therefore, to argue that the class of poetry which he represented was also supreme. Their opponents would rely on the greater depth, and on the more telling appeal to the contemporary mind, of the newer style; and it is quite conceivable that, driven by the fury of discussion, they would prefer even some of the sophistical disputes in Euripides, with their "modern" touches, to the oratory of the Homeric Odysseus or the reminiscences of Nestor. They would maintain that, better or worse, the new poetry suited the new time. We may be glad that they did not succeed in banishing Homer altogether—as, indeed, except in the fantastic Utopias of certain philosophers, they did not make the attempt. But no Athenian, so far as we know, ever tried to write an epic. Whether he preferred it or not in theory, in practice the spirit of the age compelled him to write drama. He was like Byron two thousand years after: he might cast a lingering look backward on the men of old, but he provided his contemporaries with what they desired.

Parallel to this, and doubtless to a great extent the cause of it, was the debate which, as we happen to know, arose about the same time in the sphere of

oratory. In the year 427 the Sicilian rhetorician Gorgias came on an embassy to Athens; and, we are told, his novel devices of antithesis, balance, and metaphor, set off by his powerful delivery, created a perfect furore, and drove out the simpler style associated with the name of Pericles. Not for some time were his ornaments perceived to be meretricious; and there can be no doubt that the practice of Gorgias influenced not only speaking, but prose and poetry. Even in the somewhat arid style of Thucydides we can see traces of his methods; and, both directly and by reaction, he set his mark on the drama. It may be that to him we owe the speeches in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*: and there is a curious statement that Cratippus ascribed the absence of speeches in the eighth book of that work to the fact that speeches, when Thucydides reached that point, had gone out of fashion. Be this true or not, the tradition is an illustration of the speed with which fashions in style arise, flourish, and decay, and of the accidental causes which bring about these vicissitudes: while the whole story shows the interest which, even in the middle of a war, Athens took in literary discussions.

These debates, like those of the age of Virgil and Horace of which we shall speak later, might seem to have been mainly concerned with frivolous points. Even in Aristotle, as it appears to us to-day, a disproportionate space is allotted to mere verbal questions—to what, for instance, in his ignorance of philology, he calls the shortening or lengthening of words, the use of “all” where “most” is meant, the employment of “wine” for any mixed drink,

dialectic peculiarities, metaphors, slight inconsistencies, ambiguities, even matters of punctuation. It would be easy from such passages as this to fancy that the Greeks had no critical sense, and we might well imagine that the judges who gave the prizes to playwrights appraised their merits on the most trifling grounds. But this we believe would be an error. The fact is that the critical faculty was then far ahead of the vocabulary which could express it; and the Greeks, struggling to put into words their obscure feelings, and lacking the polyglot phraseology which comes so easily to critics in our age, appear to us less wide-minded and deep-thoughted than they really were. We are told, for example, that Sophocles remarked "I draw men as they ought to be, Euripides as they are." To-day he would say "I am an idealist poet, Euripides a realist": and the judgment would sound far more penetrating. The vast increase in critical exactness which has come from the use of words properly belonging to one art for the illustration of another was then unforeseen. We use "colour" to describe music, "harmony" to describe painting, "architectonics" to describe poetry; and a huge pillage has been made from the lexicon of philosophy and science to aid our analysis of all three. The Greeks, deprived of this verbal assistance to thought, were often compulsorily dumb on what they really felt, and vocal on points which, though comparatively unimportant, lent themselves easily to verbal expression. We cannot doubt that they felt the magnificence, the vast sweep, the profundity and religious earnestness of Æschylus; yet of their overt criticisms little

remains except some carpings at his strange words. Horace for instance, echoing Greek judgments, has nothing to say but that he taught "magnumque loqui nitique cothurno": a ridiculously inadequate appreciation of the most sublime and Hebraic of all Greek poets. We cannot imagine—whatever may have been the opinion of Horace himself—that the Greek writers from whom he was borrowing would not, if they had possessed our present polyglot vocabulary, have found means of putting into words a more adequate judgment.

When we pass from Æschylus to Euripides, we are able, amid much darkness, to discover the signs of a critical controversy which at times degenerated into savage fury. It is plain enough that Euripides offered a deliberate challenge, not only to accepted religious and social conventions, but to accepted canons of taste. Rarely indeed did he gain a first prize: the *Medea*, which to us seems one of the greatest works in the world, was put at the bottom of the list. The intense antagonism of Aristophanes—an antagonism, it is true, as Professor Gilbert Murray says, strangely crossed with an involuntary admiration—may have been due, in the first instance, to political hostility; but it was also a literary antagonism. Aristophanes detested the innovations of Euripides; he disliked his "realism," he hated the kind of characters he drew, and he abominated the philosophy which the plays were meant to insinuate. Aristophanes had a powerful following. On the other hand, Euripides, like Browning, had a band of devoted adherents, few perhaps, but fit, with Socrates not the least among

them. Unlike Browning, however, Euripides did not in his lifetime win over "the public that liked him not, whom yet he had laboured for." At last, weary of almost universal spite, he gave up the contest, and left the city for a more congenial home. His victory came after his death. But if late, it was complete: he became, to a succeeding age, the typical poet of Athens, and the remains of his plays and fragments are more than those of all other Athenian tragedians put together.

Of the purely literary criticism of Euripides, apart from some trivial Aristophanic gibes at his metre and his phraseology, two or three have come down to us. He is, says Aristotle, the most "tragic" of the poets. This famous phrase we think to have been somewhat misunderstood. It is hardly unmixed eulogy; for by "tragic" we do not imagine that Aristotle meant what we mean by the word. He meant "painful" or "heartrending"; and, while the statement is perfectly true, it would not imply that Aristotle entirely approved. To the Greeks generally, a tragedy should end on a note of calm: and a purely "heartrending" conclusion would seem to them a fault. Such a play as the *Trojan Woman* or as the *Medea*, still more perhaps a play like the *Orestes* with a factitiously happy ending, plainly dragged in as a sop to convention, would fret an Athenian audience. We can see then that Euripides' determination to make tragedy what we call "tragic" excited much controversy in the Athenian world; and the answer of the poet, that many things in actual life end with unmitigated disaster, would to them but aggravate the crime. The people who

finer Phrynichus for making them cry over the capture of Miletus were not likely to pardon Euripides for showing them the Trojan War as it really was, with all its horror for the vanquished and all its bitter disillusionment for the victors. They asked for a final scene of reconciliation and serenity, and Euripides refused to give it them. From Sophocles they received an *Electra* in which even the murder of a mother was exhibited without disturbing passion; from Euripides they received a play on the same subject, the very end and aim of which was to cause disturbance, to bewilder the mind, and to compel the hearers to ask insoluble questions. So far from leaving his plays "with calm of mind, all passion spent," they went home at war with themselves, and they did not like it. Some slight image of their feelings may be obtained by recalling the effect on the older generation in the 'nineties when Hardy's novels came to shatter "Victorian" complacency: a mixture of repulsion, reprehension, and an uneasy fear that Hardy might be right after all.

The second criticism is one that somewhat astonishes us: it is that Euripides made his choruses without any relevance to the plot. Such a judgment seems indeed to show a certain crudity of thought—a prosiness which is the worst side of the Greek directness and clarity of vision. We know, for instance, that Æschylus was censured for the long-continued silence of Niobe amid the corpses of her children, as well as for the similar silence of Achilles in the *Ransom of Hector*. As if any words, even those of Æschylus himself, could express the emotions

of a mother at such a time, or those of the friend of Patroclus when he saw the father of the slayer of his friend! The "unsuitability" of the choruses of Euripides is often, like these silences, the highest fitness. Nothing could show more clearly than this failure of Greek criticism how slowly a new poetic beauty may win its way to the acceptance of the world. It is lovely, but it is strange, and we do not see the loveliness. So, one may imagine, if ever some traveller should reach Venus or Mars, and bring back pictures of these celestial landscapes, we should long refuse to recognise that foreign glory.

A third criticism on Euripides has to do with his characterisation; and here, though there is much that seems petty and sophistical, it is at any rate satisfactory that the criticism as a whole dealt with something dramatically important. Aristotle, it will be remembered, speaks of the Menelaus in the *Orestes* as gratuitously bad, and of the Iphigenia in the *Aulis* as inconsistent. But a more serious charge was based on his portraiture of women, as if he had been a confirmed misogynist, who could not keep his hatred of women out of his plays. To moderns the charge seems not only false but absurd. One might as well forget Desdemona and Imogen, and call Shakespeare a misogynist on the strength of his representation of Goneril and Regan, as confine oneself to Medea and Electra in order to discover the attitude of Euripides to all women. As a matter of fact, his plays contain the most sympathetic studies of womanhood in the whole range of classical antiquity. But the prevalence of the contrary view is none the less interesting. Till his



time real living women had been kept out of plays, precisely as they were kept out of politics; and Euripides' insistence on bringing them forward seemed, to the ideas of the time, as shameless as Pericles' consultations of Aspasia. A woman, and a modern woman, on the stage *must* be of light character, and no one but a despiser of the sex would put her there. We see in this criticism yet another instance of the way in which personal prejudice can bias literary judgments. Before a change in such *literary* judgments, if literary they can be called, is to arise, there must come a widening in men's general sympathies and attitude towards the world. *Æsthetics*, after all, are only a part of humanity, and are more closely bound up with morals than we are often apt to perceive. *Tam o' Shanter* or the *Jolly Beggars* will be preferred to the *Cottar's Saturday Night*, and *Don Juan* to *Childe Harold*, only by critics with some touch of the man of the world in them. Hence it is not surprising to note that Euripides did not receive anything like adequate appreciation until the Greeks had lost their particularism. When, through the Hellenising of the East, Greece had become largely orientalised, a host of narrow prejudices were expelled from the Greek mind; it was seen that there was much that was good in the ideas of "barbarians": and with this mental enlargement came a love of Euripides. As, on the one hand, his plays were acted in Macedon or in Parthia, so on the other hand they began to be better understood in their native land. For a similar reason, they had to wait for *full* appreciation until quite modern times, when men have at last

become catholic enough to judge fairly the most catholic-minded of the Greeks.

When we pass from Athens to Alexandria, from the fifth century to the third, and from a democracy to a despotism, we are prepared to find a new poetry; and we find it represented by the name of Callimachus. As one would expect, it is the poetry of art rather than of original and commanding genius, of labour and polish rather than of daring. Callimachus, a librarian and student of books, was the careful producer of short and elaborated poems, the skilled and practised eulogist of royalty, the master of all the recognised forms, tropes, and ornaments, the clever selector from the works of others, not the great poet himself. "Ingenio non valet, arte valet," says Ovid. The Ptolemaic age, in fact, produced but one original poet—Theocritus, and the genius of Theocritus was winged for but short flights. The dominant creed, moreover, as laid down by the "great Cham" of the time, asserted that short flights were alone possible: the prestige of Callimachus, and the example of Theocritus, seemed to show that the creed was right; and we have from that age a monotonous succession of epigrams, panegyrics, and short idylls, some of which are preserved in the original Greek, others in the imitations of Roman poets like Catullus and Propertius: some winning our admiration by their cleverness and finish, few winning anything higher.

Of the great revolt, headed by Apollonius, there is little need to speak here: the tale has been admirably told for English readers by Mr Mackail. Callimachus was still supreme, a monarch on an

apparently unassailable critical throne, when a young man appeared, like a Paynim Knight at the court of King Arthur, with a direct challenge. The long epic, said Apollonius, was still possible; and he would prove it by writing one. The great man and his satellites were disgusted, affronted, and staggered; they were like Dr Johnson when presented with the *Odes* of Gray, only more so: and, having more physical force at their disposal than Johnson, were able to translate their disgust into act. Apollonius had to leave Alexandria, and took refuge in Rhodes. There he spent a considerable time revising his epic; and it was not till the death of Callimachus that he was able to return. When, at last, the opposing influence was removed, the *Argonautica* achieved an undoubted success. It is plain that in this case, as in many others, the public taste had really been long ready for the change, and that only a somewhat factitious—but none the less powerful—prestige had prevented it from expressing itself. A revolt against the dominant opinion must have been quietly forming itself beneath the surface, and was ready—like the disruption of the Twelve Tribes—to burst out as soon as Solomon was taken out of the way. The harvest, if we may vary our metaphor, was already over-ripe. Extraneous influences of this kind often hold down a revolution beyond its natural time. The long life of Tennyson, like the long life of Palmerston, kept back a series of changes which were only waiting an occasion to rush forward in an irresistible flood: and we are often inclined to think the mental change greater than it was, because the external change, when it does come, is so violent.

After Apollonius there were indeed many Greek poets, but—apart from some writers of exquisite epigrams or elegies—there were few that call for close attention. Despite the *tour de force* of Apollonius, Callimachus had been to a great extent right. Poetry came in short spells, and exhausted itself in a few lines. Often, indeed, as was the case with so many of the Caroline poets of our own country, the poet himself was exhausted with the production of a few short stanzas: he had perhaps four or five true poetic thoughts in him, and having uttered them was silent, or, what was much worse, continued to speak when he had nothing to say. The Greek genius was now to reveal itself best not in its native tongue but when translated into Latin; and it is to Latium that we must now turn.

### III

## LATIN CRITICISM

THE story which we are about to unfold illustrates, perhaps more clearly than any other, the close interdependence between morals, politics, and social life on the one hand, and critical taste on the other. Nothing could more distinctly show what we have, perhaps too often, emphasised already, that æsthetics are only a branch of general human nature, that there is nothing positive or absolute about them, and that as the circumstances of men vary, styles of literature, and the appreciation of those styles, will vary also. It is as futile to argue questions of taste as to argue whether a knife is better than a spade: each must be considered with a view to its purpose, and the purpose of poetry is to appeal to its hearers or readers. If it accomplishes that end, it is so far "good": if it fails to do so, however lofty it may be, it is so far "bad." Thus, as the readers alter, the poets alter: and we must expect, when some great revolution has changed the attitude of vast masses of men, to find a corresponding change in the attitude of the poets whose mission it is to voice their feelings. The "literature," for instance, which suited the Hebrews in the triumphant days of David, was found altogether inadequate in the gloomy period of defeat and exile, and we have lamentations

instead of epinician odes, "Comfort ye my people" instead of "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron." The converse is seen in the case of Rome, which we now proceed, very generally and briefly, to study. A mighty expansion in Roman dominion produced a corresponding expansion in Roman taste: as the village on the Tiber enlarged first into Italy and then into a world-empire, Rome inevitably ceased to be content with the literary achievements that had satisfied her hitherto. It is likely that even if she had not found so perfect a literature as that of the Greeks awaiting her among the conquered nations with which she was brought into contact by the arms of Paulus Æmilius and Flamininus, she would yet have burst into a new poetic inspiration. Possibly she might have caught fire from the splendid lyric frenzy of the Jews; more probably she would have developed it from her own past, and some Virgil or Horace would have expressed the Roman spirit as moved by the new winds of thought. As it was, captive Greece led captive her conqueror, and the foreign influence struck Rome with almost the force of an electric shock. Victorious generals came back like missionaries sent out to convert the heathen, and returning to preach the very doctrines they had hoped to overthrow. They brought in their train philosophers and writers who speedily transformed the whole outlook of the victors. Within a generation or two every cultivated Roman was bilingual, and looked back with astonishment on the narrowness and ignorance of his ancestors. So complete was the change that—to confine ourselves to one aspect only—the old poetry disappeared from sight

to linger despised in the villages and by the camp-fires of the soldiery, and not to emerge until the Goth and the Vandal had overthrown the Empire: a regrettable loss, which Cicero bemoaned when it was too late. The subject need not here be dwelt upon: it is familiar to the most ordinary reader from Macaulay's preface to his *Lays of Ancient Rome*.

The revolution was amazingly rapid and complete: but, as was natural, it did not come without opposition. All the conservative forces resisted it: and there was much to be said for them. The old Catos could point with truth to the demoralising character of the invading creed. The Greeks, even in their best age, had never been distinguished by truthfulness, by the wider civic virtues, or by an enlarged patriotism; and defeat had intensified these weaknesses. The multitude of their philosophies, and their inveterate habit of asking the "why of a why," were clearly seen by these sturdy old Republicans to be likely to undermine Roman religion and Roman stability. Yet the attraction was too great; the inevitable had its way; and Cato himself, at the age of eighty, began the study of Greek. Even Nævius, the last of the old poets, wrote verses in the new style. But the real Rousseau of the revolution was Ennius, who, born on the edge of three civilisations, spoke Latin, Greek, and Oscan with equal ease, and was therefore specially qualified to transfer into one language the spirit of another. It is difficult to overpraise the genius and diligence of this man, who, by a lifelong *tour de force*, constrained Latin, an accentual tongue, to obey the Greek laws of quantity, and almost lifted Homer

bodily from Ionia to Magna Græcia. That he should be often violent, clumsy, and uncouth was inevitable: he was a pioneer, and left much to be done by his successors; but in sheer Titanic ability he was probably the greatest of all the Roman writers. He had to do by himself what scores of rhapsodists had done for the early Greek epic and what a score of playwrights had done for Athenian drama: that he did not utterly fail is a proof of stupendous powers. Nor are we, for forming our judgment of him, limited only to the few hundred lines of fragments which remain, or left to rely solely upon our necessarily inadequate knowledge of an ancient language. The admiration of Cicero, repeatedly expressed, the more reticent but not less visible feeling of Lucretius, the imitations of Virgil, the mere nickname of the "Latin Homer," show what his own countrymen thought of him.

But there were then, and there still are, men to maintain that the toil and genius of Ennius were spent to an evil purpose. These men, according to the general bias of their minds, hold that he gave a false turn to Roman literature; that he would have done better to develop the native poetry on its old and natural lines, rather than, like the angels after the Fall, twist the poles of the Roman world aside through twenty degrees. Latin literature, after him, they say, with all its merits, lacks spontaneity and originality; it is artificial, exotic, and imitative. All its elegance and grace they would willingly exchange for something that should express the true Roman spirit, uncontaminated by foreign influences.



Views like these, as we might expect, have been held chiefly at times in which certain Romantic winds have been blowing. When, for example, the discovery of the *Nibelungen Lied* and other German national epics had aroused a sentiment in favour of popular and unsophisticated poetry, it was natural that men should carry their criticism from Germany to Rome, and lament that Rome had left us no *Heldenbuch*, no *Kudrun*, no story of Sigurd. We find therefore, in critics of the 1840's, a depreciation of Ennius, and a tendency, still stronger and more persistent, to disparage Ennius' pupil Virgil. Doubtless, as the occasion arises, such tendencies will appear again, to be in their turn displaced by their opposites. Not Fortune herself is more variable than the standard of criticism.

But for the time being the victory of Ennius was complete and almost undisputed: and the work of his successors was but to carry to perfection what he had begun. For two or three centuries it would almost seem that the Roman idea of originality was but to find some new Greek measure to imitate, some new Greek style to naturalise. Terence, if that be not another name for Lælius and Scipio Africanus, was indeed daring enough to "contaminate" two or three plays of Menander into one: but he remains, as Julius Cæsar called him, a "half-Menander" nevertheless. Two poets of almost unsurpassed genius, Lucretius and Catullus, though nothing could quench their originality, yet were largely content, the one to introduce a Greek philosophy to his readers, the other to paraphrase Greek lyrics. But it was reserved for Virgil and

Horace to carry the process to its height. Both these great poets, declaring that the study of the Hellenic masters had not even yet gone deep enough, devoted themselves to the work of showing in practice what their precepts demanded. "Exemplaria Græca," said Horace, "nocturna versate manu, versate diurna": and in his *Odes* he claimed to have been the first to show in Latin what the Æolian songs were like. Virgil, after playing in his *Bucolics* the Roman Theocritus, started in his *Æneid* to do what Ennius had, he thought, done imperfectly—namely, to present to the world what Homer might have been under Augustus, and with a thousand more years of civilisation behind him. Both had to contend with detractors. There were men who told Horace that he was un-Latin: and there were men who told Virgil that he was a mere Homeric plagiarist. The poets answered that to plagiarise from Greece was not to steal. "You will as easily," said Virgil, "rob Hercules of his club as rob Homer of a single line": and what he meant was that he was not stealing from Homer, but, with allowance for differences of time and genius, was *being* Homer. In the same way Horace declared that in his *Satires* he was simply doing what Lucilius (whose genius he admitted) ought to have done, and would have done if he had duly studied the Greek exemplars; while in his *Odes* he was—to the best of his ability—reproducing for Rome Alcæus, Sappho, and Archilochus. Similarly, Gallus, Propertius, and Ovid, though not all of them were of the Virgilian school, claimed the "originality" of bringing Callimachus and Philetas out of their graves in

Alexandria and Cos, and reviving them in the reciting-rooms of the Roman nobles.

Such relics of the controversy thus aroused as have remained show, like the Athenian controversies of four hundred years before, a strange triviality: and for a similar reason. The censures passed on Virgil, for example, deal with the minutest and most irrelevant details. He was blamed for going wrong as to the date of Dido, for bringing Æneas to Velia before Velia was founded, for using Greek words, for using provincial words, for using plurals instead of singulars, for strained expressions. So far as these criticisms were not due to mere malice, they seem to be the result of an inability to find language to convey a much more profound and serious distaste. Uneasily conscious of disliking Virgil's whole view of poetry, these critics, being destitute of an adequate vocabulary, were compelled to confine themselves to these trifles. No language is less abstract than the Latin, and no nation was more dull to great and comprehensive æsthetic principles than the Roman. Hence, while we can discern that both the new poets and their assailants felt dimly that large poetic interests were at stake, yet the remains of the conflict show little but the most disappointing cavils and equally frivolous rejoinders. The *Ars Poetica* of Horace, with all its sage, terse, and neatly expressed maxims, has not a single line bearing on what to us is the essence of poetry: not a word on imagination, on vision, on sublimity, on the faculty divine. He defends Virgil, but he never mentions his *lacrimæ rerum*, his poignant phrases and "pathetic half-lines," or in

fact anything in him that makes a great appeal to us to-day: precisely as he seems never to have felt the "grand other-world manner" of Lucretius or the penetrating passion of Catullus. Some trivial harshness of expression, or failure of metre, blinded him to the real greatness of these mighty poets, and what he admired in Virgil was tiny daintiness or metrical smoothness. Yet it is hard to believe that the true things escaped him altogether: he who felt the greatness of Pindar must have felt that there was more in poetry than the little details on which he dilated at such length. But the absence of a vocabulary hindered him from being able to speak of the weightier matters of the law; and hence we are put off with the washings of the platter and the cup. We may charitably hope that his enemies had the same subconscious apprehensions, but were too inarticulate to let us know it.

Be this as it may, the enormous success of the *Æneid* and of the Odes crushed almost all opposition save that of the Bavii and Mævii, whose criticisms were ascribed to the jealousy of feeble and defeated rivals. Even in their case, however, we do not know that the difference was one of principle: so far as it was genuine it was more probably one of detail. All men, it is pretty clear, agreed that the Greek spirit had prevailed, and, if they censured the masters at all, censured them not for being Greek, but for not being, in their opinion, Greek enough. From henceforth there was no disputing the position: Virgil was the acknowledged standard of epic poetry, and Horace of lyric. When men like Ponticus, Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus, wrote

heroic poems, they wrote—with a difference—in the fashion of Virgil; and the lyrics of Statius are a feeble mimicry of Horace. Poor as these performances are, they are but the survivors of innumerable worse; the soulless and wearisome performances of the Codruses whom Juvenal mentions with such scorn must have been like those endless imitations of Pope which crowd the eighteenth century. Virgil, like Pope, had “taught a school of dolts to smooth, inlay, and chip, and fit” till their verses tallied like Jacob’s wands.

There can be little doubt that this atmosphere exercised a compressive influence on true genius. Some men of talent, like Ovid, found it easy to breathe and move lightly under it: they were of that adaptive kind which can assume without trouble the prevailing fashion, whatever it is. Had Ovid been born in an earlier age, he would have rivalled Lucilius. Born when he was, he caught the tone with a more or less poetic ear, and poured out what the public wanted with amazing cleverness and fluency. He was the Dryden of his age, and would, in any age, have done the work of Dryden. But there were others who were born out of due time, and never truly reconciled themselves to their environment. Of these, in my opinion, Propertius is the most striking example: he is, at least among the Romans, the most typical of all the cases of men whose genius has been fettered, and whose spirit has been dulled, by uncongenial circumstances. Unlike the mute Miltons of whom Gray speaks, he had too much knowledge, and it was chill *pedantry* that repressed his noble rage. Propertius was by

nature an original, free, direct poet of passion: by fate he was born into an age of convention, imitation, and rigid rule: and the result was much the same as if Shelley had arisen in the Johnsonian era. He could not, it is true, be altogether suppressed. Every now and then the genius, despite the barriers, bursts forth and submerges the surrounding plains: but all too soon we are plunged into vapid reminiscences of Callimachus or tawdry displays of out-of-the-way mythological erudition. Of all the Roman ladies of pleasure Cynthia is the most vital: we know her as we know the Wife of Bath herself: but Propertius compares her tears to those of Briseis, her beauty to that of Atalanta, her treachery to that of Eriphyle: contrasts her love of finery with the simplicity of Hilaria and Marpessa: threatens her with the fate of Glauce. Yet amid all this frigid ostentation, we are constantly startled by touches of real feeling. Perhaps the most imaginative comparison in all Latin—and imagination is rare indeed in Latin poetry—is that in which decaying love is likened to the faded rose-leaves falling into the wine-cups as a banquet loses its zest, and morning begins to peep upon the jaded revellers. Nor much less impressive are the lines in which Propertius declines to abandon his love-songs to sing the martial deeds of Augustus: “As, when we cannot reach a statue’s head, we lay our garlands at its feet, so, too weak to attain the heights of praise, we bring our poor tribute of incense.” Equally startling, in a Roman poet, are the daring metaphors, often conveyed in single words, which stud almost every poem, and which,

though to the English reader, accustomed to them in his own poetry, they do not appear wonderful, must have bewildered contemporaries as almost illegitimate. The admirable work of Professor Postgate collects these for our advantage, and shows what modernity lurks among the Augustan conceits which a false taste compelled Propertius to fling broadcast among his audience. Throughout the *Elegies*, indeed, we are at once surprised at the multitude of these flashes and saddened by the affectations in which they are drowned. The miasma of imitativeness stifles the free genius of the poet, and the frost of learning freezes the current of his soul. Such was the fatal force of convention, that Propertius, as we said above, fancied his true title to immortality to be the cunning with which he had followed the footsteps of Callimachus and Philetas—poets, in all essentials, vastly inferior to himself. And the Romans, like himself, seem to have been quite blind to his real greatness. So far as we know, he had no imitators: even the elegiac stanza, which he wielded with unequalled brilliancy and splendour, in which, to use the words of Merivale, he lent the pentameter something of the majesty of her heroic consort, fell into the hands of Ovid, was crushed down into a monotonous uniformity, and conquered the world as the Popian couplet conquered the “Augustan age” of English literature. Not, in truth, till almost our own time was it permissible even for a Cambridge prize-poet to construct his elegiacs on a Propertian model.

While, in fact, the Virgils and Horaces found their genius kindled by their devotion to the Greek

masters, and while on the other hand a Propertius was cribbed and cramped by it, the *servum pecus* were at least kept in a harmless imitative groove. Having nothing of their own to say, they poured out an endless succession of Theseids and Argonautics, which did no harm beyond boring their hearers to sleep, and no good beyond keeping their writers out of mischief. One might almost believe that Augustus and Mæcenas, in patronising "poetry" of this kind, and in levying whole armies of bards, had the concealed design of diverting the energies of these innumerable young men from political plotting to less perilous paths. Whether this was so or not, one half of educated Rome seems to have been engaged in scribbling and reciting, and the other half in pretending to listen: while the Emperor and his ministers went contentedly on with the work of remodelling the Constitution and administering the Empire.

On two sides only did the Roman genius, during these centuries, exert itself with true originality. The Latin language lends itself, far more than the Greek, and more indeed than almost any other, to short, sharp, and pointed epigram: and its resources were early applied to the purpose of vituperation. But they were not fully utilised till imperial times, when, it is true, any previous frugality was fully made up for. The works of Seneca, nominally based on Greek models, were really original collections of pointed sayings, for which Greek afforded no precedent, and which, though excessively wearisome when read continuously, are singly almost as suggestive as the maxims of La Rochefoucauld.



This manner, as perfected by Tacitus, gave us a new *genre* in literature, incomparable in its sustained and severe irony. It was really the transference to writing of the most native and telling forms of Latin speech: and it has all the merits of polished and cultured conversation. It is as if the writer, listening to the *mots* thrown out at the dinner-table, by himself or others, had merely given them an appropriate setting, furbished the gems into brightness, and put them forth for us to wonder at. It is safe to say that there is not, and never was, anything like Tacitus in Greece; although there can be little doubt that his studies in Greek literature taught him restraint in the use of his peculiar talent, and enabled him to arrange and adorn his epigrammatic sentences, his veiled sarcasms, and his sombre paragraphs in the most effective fashion.

The formal "Epigrams" of Martial, though not always conforming to our present-day conception of the term—they are indeed usually more like what we call *vers de société*—yet show to the full this specially Roman characteristic of brevity, compactness, and point. A Greek "epigram" has at most, as Gladstone said, "a sort of point, but not too much of it"; an epigram of Martial's, though externally similar to its Greek models, has point in plenty: and he knew well the advantage of metrical finish. Some of his lines "stick" like those of Horace, and convey their meaning as forcibly as those of Pope. Even when not very vigorous in themselves, his maxims *sound* vigorous because of the admirable verse in which they are expressed. One might almost fancy that Martial, like his com-

patriots Seneca and Lucan, had brought from Spain, the home of proverbs, a gift for keen observation, and had added to it the Roman power of summing it up in a few pregnant words.

Allied to this was the Roman satire, which, as Quintilian boasted, was entirely native, and owed nothing to Greece. Originally a mere medley or "farrago," it gradually gained form and unity, until in the hands of Juvenal it reached an almost epic loftiness, fully in consonance with the Republican character from which it sprang. At times, indeed, it rises still higher, and in stern denunciation vies with the old Hebrew prophecies.

But, satire and epigram apart, it remains true that there is little really Roman in the classical Roman literature. Even the satires were written in Greek rhythms. How much of the native spirit still lingered in the uneducated circles, as the older sturdiness lingered in the Roman camps, we can but guess. A few hints show that it was not altogether dead: we can dimly see, for instance, that Horace knew it and despised it; but it did not gain the dignity of manuscript, nor did it reach the counters of the bookshops. When, however, the external force of the barbarians, and the silent influence of Christianity, had undermined the Empire, it crept forth once more, to take the form of hymns, lays, eulogies of living chiefs, praises of dead saints. In Claudian the classic inspiration put forth its last genuine effort: a popular movement demanded and received popular expression, and such living literature as can be recovered from the wreck of the old world is not that of the cultured few, but that of

the unsophisticated many. Accent and rhyme took the place of quantity and rhythm, and Virgil almost died as the poet, to be remembered as a magician.

There can be little doubt that, amid all the causes of this reversal of taste, the chief was the rise of Christianity, which in too many cases meant the suppression of secular literature. With some honourable exceptions, the Fathers of the Church deprecated, or even anathematised, the study of the classical authors, whom indeed they regarded as being, like the oracle of Delphi, inspired by the devil. The Fourth Council of Carthage, of A.D. 398, actually forbade the bishops to read these books at all; and even the learned Jerome wished the perusal of them to be hedged about by restrictions. Many of the highest Church dignitaries could not even sign their names. It is obvious, then, that the literary taste of people thus circumscribed must have been formed on the books which they could read, and the songs which they could hear or sing. Even if, by chance, a book of Virgil or an Ode of Horace fell into their hands, they were unable to appreciate it. It was fortunate, then, that the works open to them, and more especially the Old and New Testaments, were not destitute of merit; for otherwise literary feeling might have entirely perished. As it was, there is too much reason to fear that even the Scriptures were studied too exclusively for pious edification, and that the poetry of Job or Isaiah, and the eloquent flights of Paul, passed over their readers without stirring the due enthusiasm. Few indeed were those who, like Bunyan in later times, could gain from the Scriptures a sense of

style. A revolution in religion, then, had produced not a mere revolution in taste, but its almost total extinction: and once more we see how closely allied is literature with the changes that take place in the world at large.

This brief sketch of a most important episode in literary history illustrates, again, the revolutionary effect, upon the taste of a whole community, of contact with another civilisation, at the right time and in the right circumstances. Rome, at the moment when she impinged upon Greece, was in a receptive condition of mind: she had developed just sufficiently to be able to absorb the new culture. But at such times, while minds of a certain order will make the proper use of such an importation, minds of another kind will be merely so many passive receptacles, and minds of yet another will be all but paralysed by it. At all such epochs we find on one hand Virgils and Horaces, on another Ansenes, Ponticuses, and a whole crowd of "sedulous apes," on yet another Propertiuses. The good done will be great to the great: minds large already will be yet more enlarged. Nor, in the case of the unoriginal minds, will there be much harm; men who are born to imitate will always imitate, and it matters little what model they set before them to copy. But in the case of certain individual geniuses, who yet are not strong enough to stand firm against the current, the effect may well be bad: their individuality is checked, and the message they have to deliver to the world will not be uttered with freedom and fullness. A striking parallel case may be found in the time of the early Renaissance, the story of which

is almost equally familiar. When the literature of ancient Rome began to be rediscovered, it exerted upon Petrarch and his contemporaries much the same influence as the discovery of Greece had exerted upon the Augustans. Petrarch himself for a time abandoned the vernacular, and hoped to gain, by his frigid Latin "Africa," a fame which he feared he would never achieve by his Italian sonnets or his letters. Fifty years earlier, a still greater man had only just resisted the temptation to write the *Divine Comedy* in Latin hexameters: and now, under the influence of Petrarch, the founder of Italian prose was induced to give up writing mere *Decameron*s and to spend his later years in the dreary compilation of stories *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, mythological works *De Genealogiis Deorum*, or Latin geographical treatises. It is hard to estimate the loss to literature had Petrarch met Boccaccio twenty years earlier. Such is the result when a product that flourishes in its native clime is transferred to an uncongenial soil.

## IV

### THE ELIZABETHANS

THESE illustrations will have shown how many are the influences which go to vary, to revolutionise, or to destroy literary taste. Such influences have often nothing in themselves that is strictly literary: they may be derived originally from political or social prejudice, from some great war, from some national success or disaster, from descent, rank, wealth, or learning: but such is the nature of man that no part of his mind is independent of any other, and if one member suffer all the rest suffer with it. A hungry man reads a poem in an entirely different spirit from that in which a full man reads it: and a poem read in the early morning appears very different at night. The feelings of one side of our minds will usually obey the feelings of another. It is all but impossible for politicians of one school to appraise fairly the works of a poet of a different school. If Milton had been a Tory, we may be sure that Johnson's criticism of *Lycidas* would have been less severe; and if Southey had never left the Liberal party, there can be little doubt that the Liberals would have thought more highly of his poetry. It takes a detachment of which few are capable to put aside all extraneous feelings when poetry comes up

for judgment. In our own time, the views of Kipling's writings, even on the side of mere style, held by the "Imperialists," were markedly opposed to those held by pacifists and so-called "Little Englanders." Again, to take an example from a yet wider field, the appreciation of Dante has advanced coincidentally with the growth in our knowledge of the Middle Ages, and in the understanding of the Catholic religion; an understanding which was all but impossible to our evangelical ancestors, or to those Frenchmen to whom, as to Voltaire, the Church was *l'infâme*, which was at all risks to be crushed. From the time of Chaucer, indeed, down to that of Cary, it would be hard to find a single man—with the significant exception of the all-appreciating Gray—who gave to Dante his due honour; and we may be certain that such other exceptions as may be detected will but prove the rule. Religious differences, like politics, warp the critical judgment. Nor would it be difficult to adduce weaker influences which are yet powerful enough to make us unsafe judges of literary merit.

These, be it observed, are entirely unliterary influences in themselves; and it is possible to be on the watch for them, and to some extent to correct them by balancing them against influences from opposite camps. But there are other forces, more purely literary in their origin, which equally affect our taste: and it is not infrequently found that the foes of literature are they of her own household. An example of such forces is provided by the case of Chaucer, whom we have just mentioned in one

connection, and have already referred to more than once in another. We shall not, we hope, be suspected of depreciating Chaucer's genius: indeed, there is hardly any panegyric of him to which we should not fully and unreservedly subscribe. The man who captivated Spenser on the one hand, and Dryden on the other, and who is more admired to-day even than by his own contemporaries, stands in no need of praise from us. And his influence has been proportioned to his genius. Those who best know what poetry was before him and what it was after him are best able to judge of the mighty changes which are due to his solitary force. The immense additions which he made to the common poetic store, the vast development he introduced in variety of metrical forms, the annexation to the poetical domain of themes hitherto deemed entirely beyond it, the new possibilities he revealed in the harmonious collocation of words—to say nothing of his humour, his verbal felicities, his story-telling powers—profoundly moved his contemporaries and successors. His two most slavish disciples, it is true, Lydgate and Hoccleve, were by no means men of genius; but their long-winded performances are at any rate vastly better than they would have been if he had not gone before them; and Henryson, James I (or whoever wrote the *King's Quair*), Dunbar, who *had* genius, were saved by him from dissipating it in useless channels. The good that Chaucer did to English poetry cannot, in fact, be overestimated. And yet, as so often, there was some soul of evil in the good. We have seen his scorn for the "drasty" ballad-poetry which he



parodied in *Sir Thopas*<sup>1</sup>; and his influence went near to extirpating that whole *genre*, which, with all its obvious faults, had merits of its own. He had, in truth, set a fashion; and the fashion tended, *more suo*, to become a tyranny. The literature of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is full of Chaucerism without Chaucer's genius; of dreams, because Chaucer was supposed to have written a *Dream*, of May-mornings because he had described May, of fair women because he had made his *Legend*. Almost all these are conventional, pointless, and wearisome to the last degree: the "courts," "assemblies," "parliaments" show all the dreary futility appropriate to such committee-meetings, and the allegorising makes them worse still. When once a fashion has been established, it takes a man of great originality to start afresh, and a man of courage to break through the intangible fetters. Of the criticism of that day hardly a breath survives; but we can dimly discern that it was of the same kind as that of Miss Deborah upon Tennyson: what was new was *ipso facto* bad, and the poorest copy was better than the finest original. So it always is when once a standard of excellence has been set up: dissent, in the critical world as in the Church, is anathema, and the orthodox creed, without the stimulus of opposition, degenerates into a dull uniformity. In a sense, therefore, the very splendour of the Chaucerian

<sup>1</sup> This was written before I had seen the admirable article of Professor Manly (*Essays and Studies* of the English Association, 1928) which shows that Chaucer was really parodying something else. But my actual point is scarcely affected.

day is to blame for the emptiness of the twilight that followed.

That twilight was longer-lived, perhaps, than any other in history since that which accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire. As if in compensation, however, it was succeeded at last by one of the greatest of dawns: and, with the rise of the Elizabethans, we have for the first time not only a great poetry to consider, but a sufficient stock of critical literature to enable us to see clearly the general mental tendencies of the age. We have not only Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, but a whole host of treatises, epistles, and discussions, written sometimes by the poets themselves, sometimes by professional critics, sometimes by ordinary readers, which reveal the ferment of the time, and prove—if proof were necessary—that the poets were often deliberately trying experiments in new forms, and issuing their works as challenges to opposing schools. We have Sidney's own *Apology for Poetry*, showing that he wrote his own poems on critical principles; we have Spenser's correspondence with Harvey, which makes clear that when he wrote in a certain style he knew what he was doing; we have even hints in the plays of Shakespeare that he was not ignorant of the theories of Jonson, and composed either the "scene individable" or the "poem unlimited" with the intention of meeting Jonson's arguments. What things might we not have seen done at the Mermaid! What disputes, repartees, examples from the classics, counter-examples from modern times! Gascoigne, Webbe, Puttenham sat down to compose laboured and regular treatises on

criticism: but the interest in literature was so keen that even in books like *Pierce Penilesse*, which were ostensibly on totally different subjects, the authors find themselves unable to abstain from contributing their quota to the controversy; a Nashe turns aside from supplicating the "Divell" to address the gentle reader on plays and poems, and a Mulcaster, in the middle of a work on education, yields to the same impulse. Not even the Armada, it would seem, nor yet the controversies with Rome and with Puritanism, stirred more zeal than questions as to whether poetry should be written by accent or by quantity, how far new or obsolete words should be allowed, or where the cæsura should be put in a line.

Now once more it is to be observed that, in this chaos of contending opinions, a knowledge of the character, circumstances, and upbringing of any combatant would have enabled students of human nature to foretell with exactness the side he would take: nay, to mark even the waverings of each before he came out finally on his proper side. In that portentous outrush of literary production and criticism, when Parnassus seemed to be transformed into a Vesuvius in eruption, anyone knowing Gabriel Harvey, his pedantry, his vanity, his scorn of the rascal many, could have prophesied that he would endeavour to constrain the fiery stream into a narrow and "classic" channel: that he would be an advocate of the absurdest mimicry of the ancients, and that he would endeavour, regardless of the true genius of our language, to do for English what Ennius did for Latin. Had he prevailed, we should have had what there was in Rome, a learned class of

poets, writing for the learned few, and despising the native and popular bards, who, probably, in consequence of this very contempt, would have gradually degenerated into vulgarity and barbarism. Our models would have been Stanihurst's Virgil: our song-writers would have given us sapphics like those of Webbe, "Ovidian" elegiacs, "Horatian" Asclepiads, "Catullian" hendecasyllables.

With the real talent of Philip Sidney was mingled, it must be confessed, no little pedantry and perversity: and we are not surprised, therefore, to find the same thing in him. Scattered throughout the *Arcadia* are specimens of the most elaborately wrought classical verses; and it is well known that his friend Dyer was an ardent disciple in the same school. It was, indeed, the potent influence of these two poets that almost lost us the *Faerie Queene*: and here, as we have hinted, a shrewd observer might have guessed that Spenser would, if not entirely succumb, at least vacillate. No one was more alive than he to the voice of the charmer; no one felt more keenly the attraction of Virgil and Homer; and no one was more sensitive to the seductions of admiration and friendship. He was a born hero-worshipper; and, though he resisted the blandishments of Harvey, he gave way, for a time, to the all-conquering personal magic of Sidney. Sidney, the glass of fashion, and the mould of form, returning from Paris with the latest theories of de Baïf on his tongue, would be like another Drake unloading the treasures of a New World: and all ambitious young adventurers would be only too willing to enlist under him for further voyages. It

is no wonder that the receptive Spenser was carried away. Fortunately the glamour did not last long; possibly some memories of the teaching of his master Mulcaster may have returned to him, and helped to recall the prodigal. "No one tung," said Mulcaster, "is more fine than other naturallie, but by industry of the speaker. We are to honour the learned tungs not so but that we maie cherish our own; I do write in my natural English tounge, bycause I meane good to the unlearned, which understand but English. I love *Rome*, but *London* better, I favor *Italie*, but *England* more, I honor the *Latin*, but I worship the *English*." Spenser had only to carry these views to their logical conclusion, in order to see that the true way to write English verse was to follow the natural bent of the language. Without, therefore, neglecting his classics, he turned to Chaucer as his model; and, though he could properly understand neither Chaucer's language nor the full beauty of his metre, he contrived somehow to grasp enough of both to perceive that, in the hands of a master, our native tongue has the wealth of vocabulary, and the harmony of sound, to make it unnecessary to put it on the Procrustean rack of foreign rule. It is true that even within the limits he allowed himself, he exercised much freedom, and dealt very cavalierly with his mother-tongue. Stretching "poetic licence" as Dido stretched the bull's hide, he made it cover an enormous area. Finding English almost entirely afresh, he treated it even more freely than Ennius had treated Latin. Here, it is true, he had the example of Ronsard in French, and the precepts

of Gascoigne in English. "When," said Ronsard, "you find words which are difficult to rhyme, rhyme them boldly, removing if necessary a letter." "Poeticall license," said Gascoigne, "maketh words longer, shorter, of mo syllables, of fewer; newer, older; truer, falser; and, to conclude, it turkeneth all things at pleasure."<sup>1</sup> Hence, as Ben Jonson complained, Spenser, "in affecting the ancients, writ no language"; for, if he found an obsolete form in Chaucer that suited his rhyme or metre, he took it; and, if he could find nothing suitable, he invented. But, with all his risky experiments and many failures, it remains that he was endeavouring to enrich the English language out of her own hidden resources; and it is on this account, among others, that he is justly regarded as the second father of our poetry. The path he beat out has been, with more or less exactness, followed ever since. Men have avoided his pitfalls and quagmires, but they have set their faces in the same direction: and hence Spenser is the poets' poet, while the Harveys and Stanihursts have been imitated only by a few eccentrics here and there.

It is to be remarked that in this great controversy, while of course the ordinary lines of division were frequently crossed, yet on the whole those who relied on the authority of the recognised teachers would have been wrong: and this is a lesson which it is as well for criticism always to bear in mind. The "highbrows" of the time, those most intimately acquainted with the acknowledged models, those

<sup>1</sup> See Mr Renwick's admirable volume on Edmund Spenser, chap. iii.

most contemptuous of the crowd, would, if they had prevailed, have urged poetry into a *cul de sac*. Those who saved us from this fate were the poets themselves, led fortunately by the greatest poet of the age, but assisted by the army of moderately cultivated readers, the men to whom poetry was a matter not of theory or of learning but of pure pleasure. It is then, to judge by this case, far from indisputable that the opinion of experts ought to prevail against that—I do not say of the utterly uneducated, but of the fairly well-read amateur. Poetry is not, as the old statesmen thought diplomacy to be, a mystery for the initiated only: on the contrary, the many are probably on the whole better judges than the few. Another instructive instance is to be found in this same Elizabethan period, in the controversy—an overflow of the former—between the free and natural dramatists and those who wished to work on the ancient so-called “Aristotelian” model: between those who would follow the native bent of the English mind and those who would import a foreign standard: a controversy in which the protagonists were no lesser men than Jonson and Shakespeare. Here again, the question was solved *ambulando*. There can be little doubt that in the argument Jonson would be far more ready with his authorities than Shakespeare, or that he would carry far more weight with scholastic hearers. “The attitude of the classical critics towards the popular stage,” says Professor Cunliffe, “was one of uncompromising hostility”: they refused to call the plays by the noble names of Tragedy and Comedy, and lost no opportunity of

expressing their disdain. A school of highly refined writers gathered round the Countess of Pembroke, with the intention of producing something better than the vulgar farragoes that tickled the ears of the groundlings. Kyd translated that perfect specimen of Senecan drama, *Cornélie*, from the French of Garnier; Sir William Alexander gave a correct setting of *Julius Cæsar*; and the well-languaged Daniel helped in the good work. There could, I repeat, be no doubt as to the opinion of the "best people": and if the opinion of the best people is the absolute best, then the Senecan tragedy, and the Terentian comedy, ought to have prevailed in England: we ought to be admiring not *Twelfth Night* but the *Supposes*; not *Othello* but *Sejanus*. For the Sidneians and Jonsonians were appealing to canons fixed by authority and established by prescription.

And yet it is now universally agreed that they were wrong. The case has been settled in a court from which it is not likely there will ever be an appeal. We know that the theatre-goers listened to *Julius Cæsar* and applauded it, but "would not brook a line of tedious though well-laboured *Catiline*": that they retorted Jonson's scorn in the proper fashion, by staying away when his learned buskin was on the stage: and that not all his prefaces and dedications could convince them that they ought to like what they did not. Once more they showed that a book without readers or a play without hearers is naught: and the decision of three hundred years has ratified the judgment of the contemporary crowd. Thus once more we perceive that no



amount of theorising on "æsthetic values" or "artistic perfection" will of itself secure soundness of taste, and that untutored appreciation is often juster than philosophic analysis. It is often a truer glory to be "clapper-clawed by the palms of the vulgar" than to be praised by the "highbrows." Mr I. A. Richards, in his valuable book on the *Principles of Literary Criticism*, seems uneasily to recognise that the fit audience is not always the few. He tries, indeed, to save something for "educated" criticism; but in the face of facts like the success of Shakespeare with his public, or the popularity of Bunyan with the masses, he hesitates, and in fact all but comes over to the enemy. It is impossible for so wide-minded a critic to fail to see that, precisely as the wise salesman gives his customers the goods they desire—while not omitting to insinuate certain improvements, and to endeavour stealthily to accommodate their taste to his—so with the wise dramatic or poetic craftsman. He answers the fool according to his folly, because he is not sure who the fool is. He gives *his* public what they want, while, according as his powers and growing repute permit, he imperceptibly corrects their taste, until at length he induces them to accept what they would at first have repudiated, and to acquiesce in the absence of what at first they would have demanded. A glance, for instance, at Shakespeare's plays shows how, in the early part of his career, he gave his audience clowning, bad puns, plenty of loud and vulgar scenes. As time goes on, the "gagging" of the comic actor is restrained, the sheer clowning diminishes, the Fool becomes the channel of pro-

found thought and pathos, the tragedy of blood develops into a Lear or a Hamlet; and the hearers, without knowing how, have become able to appreciate the highest creations of the human mind. At the same time, the dramatist, in his turn, has learnt from *them*. He watches keenly for what does not "go down." With his universal charity, far from despising them in the fashion of Jonson or Chapman, he realises that they have opinions, uncultured it is true, but not baseless or absurd; corrects his own judgments by theirs; improves each play by noting where the last just failed to make its due impression, and finally reaches that happy compromise between the artist and his public which approaches as nearly to perfection as is possible for humanity. It is a great mistake to regard Shakespeare as the sole author of his works. The groundlings had their share, and no mean share, in the creation of *Macbeth* and the *Tempest*. And it is precisely this accommodation to his own age that made Shakespeare, in the words of Jonson, the poet of all time: though, strangely enough, Jonson never saw the reason of this eternity of appeal.

In the Elizabethan day, then, we see two great currents of thought, which led to two great kinds of poetry—one of which has never lost its interest, while the other interests only the scholar. The enlargement of mind due to the discovery of the New World, to the defeat of the Armada, to the adventures of soldiers and sailors beyond the seas, led to a series of endless experiments, to an Athenian search for something ever new, to tricks with words, to attempts at new metres, to failures, to successes,

to achievements in which failure was hardly to be distinguished from success. At the same time, the sudden growth of scholarship, the study—indiscriminate and confused—of the classics, which were taken, without due distinction of character and date, to be the models of style and form, produced a class of writers who endeavoured to graft upon English the qualities of Greek and Latin, to make plays on “Aristotelian” rules, to judge everything by the standards of twenty centuries before. It is true that but few authors were absolutely consistent adherents of their own schools. Jonson himself, in the *Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*, forgets much of his classicism and writes like an Elizabethan: Shakespeare himself, at times, borrows from the Romans. But the two *genres* are nevertheless distinct: and it should never be forgotten that the one which triumphed is the one which adapted itself the more fully to the dominant *popular* taste; which in the main ignored the Pharisaic prohibitions and regulations, and, like Christianity, declared that there was but one principle on which to appraise plays and poems—“By their fruits shall ye know them.”

Once more then we come back to the first and last principle of criticism—a mere book, in itself, is nothing; it is the product not of one man, but of its author, its readers, a thousand vague impulses from this wind of feeling and that; and it is to be judged as part and parcel of all these influences. Inasmuch, however, as the critic is but one, and as he can never enter fully into all the circumstances which have made the book, his judgment can never

be final: he can never say the "last word" upon it. And, even when the "last word" is said, it is not decisive, and may be no better than the first. Until—which will be never—we can integrate *all* opinions upon a book, recorded and unrecorded, conscious or unconscious, informed and uninformed, the author's own and that of others, we can never form a positive judgment; and every sentence of the critic should be preluded with a mental "subject to revision."

## V

### THE CLASSICISTS

THE period on which we are about to enter is one of those in which Nature seems to imitate the cinematograph, and in which changes pass so speedily before our eyes that we can scarcely follow the action of the piece. Such periods are those of the fall of the Roman Republic, of the French Revolution, of 1848. At times like these men live as dangerously as even Nietzsche could desire, and as rapidly: the work of an ordinary century is packed into a few months. New ideas rush forward, are accepted, are put into action, found wanting, discarded; and others, equally short-lived, take their place. Heroes are set up and pulled down; constitutions are made and unmade; rulers are banished amid execrations and return in triumph. Politicians are found now on one side, now on another; a Sieyès, contriving somehow to live, emerges into full light for a few weeks, vanishes into obscurity; returns, and again vanishes: a Barère flits hither and thither, ever supporting the cause that is for the moment successful. In such times we see a Talleyrand now a Bishop, now an avowed atheist, then a minister of Napoleon, then the chief agent in the restoration of the Bourbons. So with our own country in the seventeenth century. Our politicians were Ashleys,

in succession Anglicans, Presbyterians, Cromwellians, Lord Chancellors, faction-leaders, exiles: and the age itself may be compared with Ashley's colleague, Buckingham, who

“in the course of one revolving moon  
Was chymist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon”;

being, in fact, not one age, but the epitome of all ages. Even we, as we read the story, catch something of the instability of the time, and feel like the Merchant Abudah, who in one short dream lived through a whole strenuous career, and woke exhausted.

Literature inevitably followed the same tortuous path. Every week a new theory of government was propounded by some Harrington or other; every week a new pamphlet, licensed or unlicensed, on Church or State, was flung upon the world. Plays, detested by one party, naturally became more scurrilously partisan, until suppression checked their activities. Under the liberal-minded Oliver, they stole in once more as operas. After the Restoration they rushed back in a scandalous flood. Panegyrics on the Protector were turned in a few months, by their own authors, into panegyrics on the Stuart; congratulations to James on the birth of his son appeared again as congratulations to William and Mary. Defenders of Presbyterianism became champions of Independency, and soon afterwards of Anglicanism. Manner varied with the matter: the phraseology that had suited the times of Charles I was hardly adapted to that of the Saints; nor did the “bagpipes of the squeaking train” appear appropriate instruments for the light-minded men

of the Restoration. The long involved sonorous sentences, which were the natural language alike of the solemn Puritan Milton and of the grave Cavalier Clarendon, gave way to the short clear periods of Dryden. The obscure and difficult poetry of Donne, Cleiveland, and Cartwright was displaced by the terse and simple couplets of Waller, Denham, and their followers. The change was similar to that between Vandyke and Kneller, and only less marked than that between Strafford and Arlington, or than that between Mrs Hutchinson and Barbara Palmer.

No one can resist the tendencies of his age. Even the most self-centred minds are subtly influenced by the movements around them, and, even if like Samson they oppose them in the open field, are betrayed by the seductions of Timnath. They cannot help breathing the atmosphere of the time, and even when they think they are escaping from it, it is that very air that gives them the strength for their imaginary flight. Many men, in whom stubbornness degenerates into sheer perversity, persuade themselves that they are unaffected by these influences. They forget that it is the very force of the influences that makes *them* strong: were the current less violent, they would have to use less effort to contend against it. It is from the enemy that, like Hannibal, they steal the arms to fight against him: and, while thinking to weaken their age, they are really adding to its strength. The historian, coming to the study of the times like these, calmly adds the struggles of the rebels to the other tendencies of the period, and enters all together as a single sum.

Of all this we find an example in the man who is often chosen as the very type to contradict it. Milton is generally spoken of as a solitary unremoved Teneriffe or Atlas amid a surrounding plain; a rebellious exception amid a monotony of rule. He is the dauntless Abdiel amid the hosts of Satan, the unyielding heretic amid a crowd of orthodox, the Republican amid Royalists, the Shadrach refusing to worship the golden image. In his poetry, again, he is the lofty contemner of rhyme in the days of Dryden, the controller of the "planetary wheelings" of verse in the days of the tripping couplet; the author of *Paradise Lost* in the days of *Gondibert*, and the author of *Samson Agonistes* in the days of the *Conquest of Granada*. This is the ordinary view, and to a certain degree it is the true one. But when we look more closely we see that it involves a serious error. A study of Milton's life and works will show that he was, on one side, the docile pupil of his age, and on another the opponent to whom the age itself supplied the weapons and the invincibility. For it was an age of obstinate men, who constrained their enemies into obstinacy, and who were not only violent themselves, but the cause of violence in others.

Milton's earliest poems are imitations of Spenser, who died but nine years before Milton was born, and whose vogue was still great: whose example was still provoking Phineas and Giles Fletcher to those elaborate allegorical poems which remind us of sermons on the Parables in which every detail is pressed into the service of homiletics. As a youth, then, Milton shows no particular independ-



ence. At school and college he simply carries further than others the devotion to classical studies which was the mark of cultured men of that time. He shows no antagonism to plays; and it would appear that he frequently attended performances of the then popular playwrights Beaumont and Fletcher. He himself wrote a masque; and was himself the chief actor in a semi-dramatic entertainment at his own college. He wrote an epitaph for Shakespeare's "honoured bones" and has even been suspected of contributing another eulogy to a folio edition of the plays. A little later we can indeed discern that he has taken his side in the great controversy of the age; but it *is* the great controversy of the age; it is not a mere quarrel of isolated pedants, but a living struggle, of the deepest interest to every man in the realm. He is certainly still of his time and country, and indeed one of the most representative types that can be found. At the same time we can see that he is gradually drawing away from the romantic school of poetry which had been his early delight, and growing nearer and nearer to the classical. He has not abandoned the idea of writing dramas; but they are to be on the Sophoclean model, and would have pleased Jonson more than Shakespeare. His projected epics are to be on Virgilian lines. All this is part of the general tendency of the day.

He returns from Italy, and throws his whole force into the defence of liberty. Among innumerable pamphlets his are of the few that survive. "The shop of war," he tells us himself, "had not more anvils and hammers working, to fashion out the

plates and instruments of armed justice in defence of beleaguered truth, than there were pens and heads, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present the approaching reformation"; and he might have added that the "shop of ideas" was finding ever new styles in which the ideas might be most suitably conveyed. His own style, at any rate, is well adapted to its purpose: it is like none seen before, because the emergencies were unexampled. One may imagine that, had Charles I seen some of these works, he would as willingly have killed the book as a dozen men in the opposing army. As the times become more strenuous, the style of Milton gains in vigour. But it is his audience that makes him so gigantic-ally strong. He might have said, with Goethe, "What were I without thee, friend (or enemy) Public? All my speech but soliloquy, all my emotions dumb."

As the combat deepens, much of the old lightness vanishes. The man who had admired Shakespeare can, it is true, still quote him with a purpose, but the "forests and enchantments drear" of Spenser are forgotten in the contemplation of his "iron man," Talus, in whom Milton seems to forebode the coming Cromwell; and the fount and origin of Elizabethan romance is now "the vain and am-atorious poem of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*; a book in that kind full of worth and wit, but among religious thoughts and duties not worthy to be named." It is becoming impossible for him to read freely and easily as of old, or to consider a book

without reference to its bearing upon the quarrel of the moment. Critical judgment is becoming subject to the stress of the times; and as in the recent war there were some English musicians who could not listen to the music of the German Beethoven, so Milton found it hard to enjoy a work which had appealed to his enemy Charles I. So greatly does our taste depend upon our momentary conditions!

With the defeat of Puritanism many thousands of men made terms with the victor; that Milton and others like him did not do so does not prove that he was not of his age, but merely that he was one of the survivors of a past time who yet are to be taken into consideration in our appraisal of an epoch. That is a very shallow judgment which refuses to count the fathers of a generation as parts of it, or the stronger and more independent minds as neither contributing to it nor receiving from it. In actual fact there is much in *Paradise Lost* and in *Samson* which is not merely *in* the Restoration era, but *of* it. When Dryden asked permission to use the great epic as an opera, he recognised that the epic had its popular appeal; and, though Milton contemptuously told him to "tag the verses if he would," he must yet have felt that the epic had not, after all, come at an age too late, nor to a climate too cold for it. As a matter of fact, the poem did hit the prevailing taste. It was not a Puritan, but the Royalist Denham, who said that *Paradise Lost* was the noblest poem of any age or any country; and it was Dryden the courtier who said "This man cuts us all out, and the ancients too." It is a very strange mark of unfitness for the

time, that an epic poem of the class of *Paradise Lost* should pass through two editions in seven years, and sell thirteen hundred copies.

Milton was the greatest man of his age, but his age knew it. There is indeed but one point in which he ran counter to the literary prejudices of the time, and that was in his choice of blank verse. His classicism, his concreteness, his brevity and precision, his freedom from Elizabethan laxity, all this was what the age desired: and, as the greatest poet of the age, he gave it what it desired in fuller perfection than any other. It was the same with his drama, in which he followed their favourite rules with more utter hardihood and more uncompromising faithfulness than any other had the knowledge, the gifts, or the daring, to show. He is, in fact, the Restoration time at its sublimest.

That this is so is shown by the fact, which Walter Raleigh was the first to bring out in all its clearness, that the "new school" at once took him as its model, and pillaged him without scruple. The most typical product of that school is the *Iliad* of Pope: and the *Iliad* is almost a cento of Miltonic phrases—a fact of which anyone can assure himself in a few minutes, and which Raleigh has illustrated with his usual aptness.

That the "Augustan" school did not discern the true secret of Milton's greatness is obvious enough from these very pillagings; but it is equally obvious that they regarded Milton as their master. Addison's well-known criticism of *Paradise Lost*, again, though to our minds sadly inadequate, judges the poem throughout simply as the supreme work

of the school of which he himself was a humble member.

But this new school, whether we regard Milton as belonging to it or not, is the natural product of the age in which it arose. In the first place, the Elizabethan style had simply worn itself out. Shirley, the last of the Elizabethans, shows a sad declension not merely from Shakespeare but from Ford and Webster; and, even if he had been as great as his forerunners, yet, human nature being what it is, a change would have been demanded and would have been forthcoming. Men cannot endure too much even of a good thing; and will have new wine even if it be worse than the old. In the same way the school of the so-called "Metaphysicians" was bound to disappear. Of that school the last representative was Cowley, who died in 1667, and who—though I do not wish to disparage his genius—was a poor successor of Donne. Even had he been longer-lived, however, and had his genius been greater, that class of poetry must have disappeared: for the Commonwealth had cured men of seriousness and of the willingness to disengage the meaning from crabbed verse and involved syntax. They had had enough of the rigid rule of the saints; and they accepted the political sway of Charles only on condition that they were allowed social and moral laxity. In the same way they tired of conceits and difficult ingenuities, surrendering themselves to laws which tended to simplicity of style and easiness of reading; and they rejected complicated metres and far-sundered rhymes in favour of measures that the dullest could feel, and rhymes the con-

nection of which could not be missed. After the efforts it had taken to scan the lines of Donne and Marvell, and after the long search for corresponding rhymes in the Pindarics of Cowley, it must have been as great a relief to them to light on the couplets of Waller or Denham, as to feel that an oath was no longer a penal offence, and that they could play games on Sunday.

The Commonwealth, again, had killed interest in deeper subjects, in schemes of government, in abstractions, in religious and theological subtleties. Beyond an equal detestation of Dissent and of Romanism, men cared no longer about religion; and beyond a determination to maintain the monarchy and submit no longer to a military despotism, they cared little about politics. Poetry, therefore, must leave these subjects alone, or concern itself with them within the prescribed limits. Milton, it is true, was serious enough; but, as we have seen, he was clear and definite: his allusions were classical, his visions controlled by Biblical precedent. Cowley, on the other hand, though his epic was in the popular couplet, and though he followed the classical models even to the detail of calling David Jessides, yet perceived that his poem was out of tune with the spirit of the age, and completed but four books of the projected twelve. The day of small things had arrived; and in *this* return from the Babylonish exile it was the great things that were despised.

We find then that the man who, perhaps more than any other in literary history, had the gift for seizing the ideas of the moment and giving them expression,

confined his epics to subjects of the day. Dryden was the first of our true men of letters; his business was to say with force and clearness what all were thinking. For *Paradise Lost* he gave them *Absalom and Achitophel*, the first half of an epic which, not having the gift of prophecy, he could not complete: using the language of the day, and referring to politicians whom people met in the clubs. For Satan he gave Shaftesbury, for Belial Buckingham: and it is certain that men had never to read a line twice in order to know what he meant. Similarly with his argumentative poems—the *Religio Laici* is a plain, strong, admirably put defence of the theology of an ordinary educated Anglican, and the *Hind and the Panther* a topical poem on the religion of James II—so topical, indeed, that it was almost out of date before it was published. Even when the Revolution deprived him of the power of expressing his own opinions on questions of the day, he gave his readers plays, Boccaccian tales, settings of Chaucer, versions from the Latin, all of which were precisely what the age desired.

To all this we must add the powerful influence of French models. That somewhat too much has often been made of this is true: we should have seen something very like what we did see if there had been no France across the Channel: for the change was in the air of England, and might have been prophesied by a shrewd observer even in days when Louis XIV was not yet out of tutelage. Too much, also, has been made of the influence of the Court, which was, it must be confessed, but an annexe of Versailles, and the chief men in which, from the

King downwards, were French in their sympathies and too often pensioners of the French monarch. Charles and James were the sons of a French princess, and interlarded their conversation with French phrases; they unquestionably preferred the Parisian style of play to the Elizabethan, and enjoyed the subtle flattery when Dryden inserted a French word here and there in a panegyric. But plays and poems were not as a rule written solely, or even primarily, for the Court; they appealed then, as now, to the public, and had to accommodate themselves to the popular taste.

That taste, however, was indubitably touched by French criticism and example. Subtly penetrating from the educated classes into the class of playgoers and poem-readers, influenced and influencing in turn, the views of Boileau and Bossu, and the plays of the Parisian stage, produced a profound effect, which may be, and has been, exaggerated, but cannot be ignored. Adaptations of Molière and Corneille appeared in the London theatres to please our taste and mould it. Prefaces like those of Dryden explained the principles by which those plays were to be judged: talk in the coffee-houses and discussions in the streets made the ideas familiar. There were then practically no newspapers or reviews; but in a small public, and in a London of but half a million inhabitants, the *phémé* flew rapidly from mouth to mouth. The exhaustive work of Professor Clark has for the first time revealed in its fullness the immensity and far-reaching power of the French domination, and shown how the *Art Poétique* of Boileau and the



critical canons of Bossu became part and parcel of the thought of thousands who could not have told whence they received them.

But Boileau might have preached precisely as he did without producing any effect across the Channel, but for a series of political events with which he had nothing to do. *L'Art Poétique* appeared in 1674: the battle of Rocroi, which put an end to the military hegemony of Spain, was fought thirty years before; and since then the French arms had not suffered a single important reverse. French diplomacy had been even more uniformly successful. The most brilliant of kings was on the throne, and, for thirteen years, had attracted to himself the loyalty of his own nobles and the mingled fear and admiration of Europe. French commerce, fostered by Colbert, had gone ahead by leaps and bounds; and, while other countries had passed through revolutions and disasters, France presented to the world a picture of prosperity—largely deceptive, but none the less imposing. At the same time, a school of poets and dramatists, controlled and ostentatiously fostered by the Court, was producing works still unsurpassed in their kind: and since the language of France had forced itself on the world as the language of diplomacy, these were understood by many foreigners as the literature of Italy and Spain had been understood seventy years before. What wonder then that these works should conquer the literary world as the generals and envoys of Louis reduced Franche Comté or Roussillon? What wonder that men read French poems with something of the awe derived from reading French proclamations? It was not

possible to inspect them in the dry light of unimpassioned criticism: they came to the world with the glamour of Turenne's victories and Louis' magnificence upon them, and borrowed from an alien sphere a splendour which doubled their own. What Louis was in war and in fashion, such was Boileau in criticism, and such were the French poets as exemplars: but without the glory of Louis they would have been little indeed. Against the *lettres de cachet* of Boileau there was no appeal, and against the prestige of Corneille and Racine it was useless to struggle: for behind them was the master of thirty legions, with whom you bandy neither compliments nor contradictions.

Thus the literary supremacy of France, and the great change of taste in England which so largely resulted from it, were the work of marshals, diplomats, financiers, and intendants, who were all alike content to sink their own glory in that of a brilliant and conspicuous master. Like tributary rivers, they lost their very names in that of the stream into which they discharged themselves. But in so doing they found a mark they little meant: they spread abroad a culture in which many of them took no interest at all, and while helping to make Louis "the great monarch," were unconsciously disseminating a literature. This unintended work, indeed, was far more lasting, and far more widely extended than their physical conquests. The literature of France crossed the Rhine, the Alps, and the Channel; its reign survived Louis' descendants of the third generation, and was unaffected by Blenheim and Ramillies. Nay, seventy years later,

the very captain who shattered the French line at Rossbach was prouder of his French verses than of his military glory, and more anxious that Voltaire should praise his writings than that the crowd should acclaim him as a hero.

Now the most noteworthy feature in this period of literature is the complete certainty on the part of its devotees that at last an absolute standard of beauty had been found. The age of barbarism was over. Waller and Denham had "refined our numbers," Dryden had given them energy, and Pope unfailing harmony and correctness. Shakespeare, it was admitted, was a genius; but untutored, uncultivated, and savage: Chaucer very fair for his time; Spenser great but grotesque. Now, at last, the true point had been reached: the Augustan age had touched the very seamark of the utmost sail of verse. It was recognised that language was unfixed, and that in the process of time Dryden might *appear* as Chaucer; but none the less, in actual fact, Dryden, and his cautious pupil Pope, had attained perfection. Judging by canons which, as we have seen, were exceptional, temporary, and local, which were the product of certain remarkable circumstances in a remarkable age, and which to us have all the signs of the transitory, they believed their works to answer the great Idea of beauty, the form of perfectness hidden in the heavens. Not even the authors of the age of George V could be more sure that their ancestors were wrong and they right than the authors of the age of George I. Nothing could show more clearly how apt we are to mistake our own fancies for facts, our own rules

for laws of nature, and ourselves for the measures of the universe.

There is nothing good or bad anywhere, and most certainly nothing in the sphere of æsthetics, but thinking makes it so: and one is therefore constrained to admit that since the Augustans thought their style good, good it was. There is no definition of good writing that does not take in the reader; and if writing satisfies the reader and does not entirely dissatisfy the writer, it must be regarded as fulfilling the definition. But this is only a relative goodness, after all, and the mistake the Augustans made was the mistake we are all tempted to make—that of forgetting relativity. They ought to have reflected that precisely the same reasons which made them approve of Pope and Dryden made their ancestors approve of Chaucer and Spenser: and that therefore those poets were, relatively, just as good as their own. When they asserted that the former times were barbarous and their own civilised, they were but doing the same thing over again, and dogmatising as to the relative terms civilisation and barbarism. *Their* age was civilised because it was theirs; the other barbarous because it was that of the others. It was therefore a just penalty that they in their turn should be called tasteless and uncivilised: except that, as usual, the penalty fell not upon them but upon their children.

Before leaving this period, I should wish to draw attention to one feature in it, which seems to me to provide the most striking of all possible illustrations of my thesis. This was the age of the Authorised Version—a work which has done more to alter,

to fix, and to standardise English style than any other.

Note first that this work was produced when the language was still fluid; when syntax and vocabulary were still undetermined, and when amid the struggling dialects none had yet asserted an unassailable supremacy. It appeared also in the midst of universal excitement and ferment: and it was read by all. Such a work, at such a time, exercises an unparalleled influence. Its very faults become virtues, its laxities laudable idioms, its purple patches models for the rhetorician. As Charlemagnes and Napoleons can arise only in ages of relaxed rule, so writers like our translators can arise only when there is no grammar: and, like Charlemagne and Napoleon, they make the codes for subsequent generations.

Such a work, in Germany, was Luther's Bible, which not only established the High Dutch dialect as the literary language, but practically created modern German prose. A like effect, I do not doubt, would have been produced by the so-called Bible of Wiclif, had the Lollard movement succeeded. At the very least it would have contended with the poems of Chaucer for the throne of English literature, and it is far from improbable that it would have established a lasting dynasty; that we should have written in Wiclif's semi-Northern dialect, and that the South Midland would have been reduced to the level of Hardy's Wessex speech. We might have looked back to Wiclif as to the rock from which we were hewn, and have adorned our writings with quotations from his phraseology. For

“give ear” we might have said “give tent”; for “we are thy people and the sheep of thy pasture,” “we ben thy puple and the sheep of thy leasowe”; and for “to everything there is a season,” “all things have time, and all things under sun passen by her spaces.” But fate and the Church, Parliament and the Statute *De Hæretico Comburendo* intervened; the Bibles were seized and destroyed, and Wiclif’s work remained but as a curiosity to point a moral and form the subject of a conjecture.

What Wiclif failed to do, Tindal and Coverdale, circumstances favouring, did at second-hand. For their translations, revised in the reign of James I, gave us the Authorised Version; and the Authorised Version, appearing when it did, exerted an influence in England greater even than that of Luther’s version in Germany. Had the times been different, it would have had little effect: had it, for example, been published at the present day, amid such indifference to religion and to Scriptural study as is rife now, our literature would have taken an entirely different form. It came, however, precisely at the time when theology was the one dominating interest in England; when people thought theology, talked theology, and dreamt it; and when they imagined that theological—nay that scientific—truth could be found by minute study of the sacred text, or that an adversary could be confuted by an apt quotation of two or three isolated words from St Paul. Hence this work was known, and known *verbatim* and *literatim*, as Homer was known by the men of Athens. It is common to wonder at the detailed knowledge of Scripture shown by such men as

Milton and Bunyan. But there is scarcely a work of the time which does not show a knowledge almost equally profound. Every page of the Anglican Fuller has at least one more or less disguised allusion to the Authorised Version; his enemy Peter Heylin is quite as profuse; and even Clarendon is not without his references and quotations. Nay, one of the most secular of poets, Dryden, is often hardly more than a Biblical plagiarist: and the very blasphemies of Buckingham and Ashley were built upon a close acquaintance with Holy Writ. Some Prospero had taught them the Bible, and their profit on't was that they knew how to curse. No other book, in fact, ever had such an influence as this translation: and it is no wonder that it became the standard of English style. I need give no proofs that such has in actual fact been the case. Newman, Froude, Ruskin are but three names amid a host of panegyrists. When Lady Holland, laying down the law on the English language, showed she had never heard of the Parable of the Talents, "I did not tell her," wrote Macaulay, "that no one ought to set up as a judge of English who had not the Authorised Version at his finger-ends."

But, remarkably enough, there is no sign that the literary beauty of the Version was perceived at the time of its appearance. The very opposite would seem to have been the case. So far as people, intent on studying the book for its theological value, had leisure to consider what to them was the unimportant question of its style, they disapproved of it. It is enough here to allude to a familiar passage of Selden in order to prove our point. And

indeed the Authorised Version abounds with bad grammar, with Hebraisms, with Graecisms, with solecisms. But what I wish to emphasise is that in multitudes of cases loosely expressed or even wholly unintelligible passages, having become consecrated by repetition, are now regarded as beautiful, whereas, if they were now to be seen for the first time, they would be censured as Selden censured them when they were new. The Authorised Version, in fact, has itself formed the taste that approves of it. It is, in this connection, very significant that the one part of it which is *not* approved by members of the Church of England is the Book of Psalms, which is certainly not a whit inferior to the rest, but which happens not to be the version familiar to Church-goers. It is well known that the Church has retained in its Liturgy, for the Psalms alone, the version of Coverdale. Hence, being used to that version, Churchmen are irritated by the Authorised—but only in the Psalms. The exact reverse is the case with Scotsmen, Americans, and Non-conformists generally, to whom the Prayer-book turns of phrase give precisely the same annoyance as the Authorised to Anglicans; for it is on the Authorised that *they* have been brought up. To Catholics, I believe, both alike are equally fretting after the Vulgate or the Douay Version.

When to the natural attraction of familiarity we add all the sacred associations, the tender memories, the stirring impulses, with which these words are bound up, one can hardly wonder that criticism is lost in gratitude, that a literary beauty is often imagined to dwell in phrases charged with such



meanings, or that it is not possible for the toughest of us to dissect them. But it is perhaps even more by its "rhythms" than by its language that the English Bible has endeared itself to its readers, and finally established a standard of its own. Its beauty is emphatically a "beauty born of murmuring sound." Men of middle age will recall that it was on this score, far more violently than on any other, that the revisers of 1881 were assailed: they had marred the melody of the ancient masterpiece. Since then, whenever a revision of the version has been undertaken—as distinct from an absolutely new and independent translation—the editor has been careful to remark that, while correcting the obvious mistranslations, and altering a few archaisms that lend themselves to misunderstanding, he has striven to preserve the well-known "rhythms."

But here again it is probably familiarity that has achieved the result. As Dr Johnson long ago pointed out, there is no objective beauty or ugliness in one word more than in another; and I have myself known Slavs to whom *Przebitschewsky* was a harmonious name and *Howard* an unpleasing one. Much more is this the case with *collocations* of words: what we have once learnt falls into a natural swing, and we cannot bear an alteration. People, for example, who are accustomed to misquote a line of poetry do not easily bring themselves to use the correct form; the well-known swing is too much for them, and they convince themselves that if the author did not write the words they are used to, he ought to have done so. Such was the feeling of certain old scholars when Bentley proved that a line

of Horace must be emended; and such is the feeling of many people to-day when informed that "the man who hesitates is lost" ought to be "the woman who deliberates." And so with Bible rhythms. We do not find that those to whom they come for the first time always think them so remarkable. Many of them indeed are such as in another context would be regarded as bad; such are the rhythms of verse which repeatedly occur in the midst of prose. These, when we meet with them in Lytton or Dickens, displease: in the Bible they delight. Many others, which follow somewhat closely the swing of the original, are hardly adapted to the genius of our language: but the soothing influence of repetition is such that we have often observed good ladies absorbed in silent rapture while listening to a passage of which every word was inaudible, but the rhythm of which was apparently as pleasing as that of the babbling brook to Gray.

This is not to deny that there is a "real" beauty in the Bible of 1611, and a beauty very remarkable when we compare its relatively simple language with the contorted style of many contemporary works. Much of this beauty is doubtless due to the fact that, like its successors, the book was a revision of an older work: many of the finest passages are but little altered from Tindal. But this very archaism was one of the causes of the dislike felt for it when it appeared, as it is one of the causes why it is admired to-day: and this fact illustrates once more the strange vagaries of taste. One would have thought that a beauty so obvious to-day must instantly have captivated the contemporary readers as it captivates

us. But analysis reveals that half the beauty did not then exist. As Glastonbury or Rievaulx is more beautiful in ruin than it was when first built, so time has lent our Bible many a charm which it had not when it was new. And further, our ancestors were with regard to it in much the same position as our fathers with regard to the Revised Version of the 'eighties. They were familiar with the "rhythms" of Coverdale or the Geneva version, and the constant variations in the midst of a general likeness rasped their nerves as the Revised rasped the nerves of Dean Burgon. Many an improvement seemed to them a wilful perversion, and, with the old in their ears, they could not endure the new. Not for half a century, not till the generation that had wandered in the wilderness had died out, did the English people really take King James's Bible to their hearts. Nor, even if no previous version had been in existence, would they have cherished it as we do: for it had not the associations of three hundred years which have endeared it to us.

But, beautiful by accident or beautiful in essence, it has become part and parcel of our heritage, and detached criticism of it is now impossible. Phrases from it are woven into our daily speech, and lend to the prose of to-day the poetry of the past. It is the warp and woof of many a writing, the theme of which is far from Scriptural. It gives the zest to the *Philippics* of Ruskin, to the prophetic declamation of Carlyle, to the epigram of Macaulay. One who does not know his Authorised Version loses the point in many a sparkling sentence of Lamb, and fancies a flatness in Wordsworth which does not

exist. As much of Gray or Tennyson has little flavour if we fail to see the subtle imitation of some classic author, so in scores of writers we miss the saving salt if we fail to catch a Biblical echo. And, when we reflect that all this would have been different, or entirely absent, if the Version had never been written, we can dimly see what a portentous influence upon literature one great book, universally used and known, may have. We are all acquainted with families which, among themselves, habitually use the language of some book (such as *Alice in Wonderland* or *Gulliver's Travels*) which every member knows more or less by heart, and the conversation, though bewildering to outsiders, gains immeasurably in liveliness for the initiates. Even so with the great Anglo-Saxon family, and their household book. They speak an esoteric *lingua franca*, and often, by a single phrase, convey a meaning which would otherwise take many sentences: their written conversations gain a brevity, a force, and a romance where otherwise there would be tedium, dullness, and platitude. That our Bible has been able to conquer for itself such a position as this speaks more for it than all the vague panegyrics in which so many writers have indulged: and the growing ignorance of the Bible is one of the gloomiest omens for the future of our literature that the most pessimistic of augurs could imagine.

For, when, by any means, and in any fashion, a standard of beauty has been once established, that standard *is* beauty. It may well be that a mere accident might have set up another of a quite

different kind; but *for us* the one we have *is* our standard: and, within limits, we must conform to it. "Beauty is use, use beauty." The standards of the Oriental poets are not ours: to us their images appear far-fetched, their language high-flown. It does not follow that an Oriental writer should imitate our style. A long succession of circumstances, the influence of climate, history, national or tribal character, has given the Oriental poet, and his hearers, a conception of beauty which it is his business to satisfy; and to assert that *our* taste is the purer is simply to dogmatise, precisely as to assert that our civilisation is the higher is merely arrogance. We think our civilisation higher simply because we are used to it and theirs is strange: and we think our style better for the same reason and with equal want of justice. But, when a style *has* been established in a nation, that very fact is a proof that there is some conformity between the style and the national character: it could not have arisen if it had not suited us: and those who endeavour to change it do so at their peril. To attempt a revolution may, at times, be necessary; but the revolutionary doctrine must itself have its roots in the past, or it will assuredly fail.

## VI

### THE ROMANTICS

It is universally admitted that the great change which took place between about 1780 and 1820 was one of the most radical in all literary history; and the feeling is equally unanimous that it was an immense advance. After reading Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and turning to Coleridge's *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Lamb's more casual but not less illuminating criticisms, Hazlitt's reviews, De Quincey's papers, one feels as if one had come out of a stuffy chamber into the open air: and still stronger is that feeling if one reads Hayley's *Triumphs of Temper* and then a few pages of Wordsworth or Shelley. It is a new world, a brighter clime: we have passed, like Dante, from Inferno, or at least from the Paradise of Fools, into a region where it is possible to behold the stars. The denizens of this new realm speak a higher language, know a loftier music, talk of greater things than those we have known before: they move with a brighter step, and, though less complacent, are informed with nobler hopes. It might seem, at first sight, as if they were of another race; as if some great convulsion had swept away the ancient inhabitants, and settlers, from a far-off land, had come to colonise the isle.

And yet, as usual, when we look more closely, we

find that the revolution is less complete than we had thought. The days of catastrophe are over; Yahweh has kept his promise that he will send no more floods to destroy the earth: progress is made, if sometimes rapidly, yet always step by step, and the new is ever parcel of the old. Looking at the younger generation, we find it bears the features of its fathers, and looking back at the fathers, we see in them the promise of their sons. We thus begin to suspect a hastiness in our judgments, and a too great willingness to generalise from insufficient premises. Perhaps we have not seen in the eighteenth century all there was to see; and in the light thrown on it by its successor we may mark features which we have left unnoticed. Let us then, before going on to the "Romantic" age, take one more look at the "Classical."

No man, and certainly no generation, is cast all in one piece: and any attempt to sum up either in a few words, a chapter, or a volume, must be inadequate. The character of every man we meet is constantly startling us by strange inconsistencies, and we are forced to admit that there are more things in human nature than are dreamt of in our psychology. No formula will satisfy the human equation, and there are points in every one of us that refuse to fit in with any definition.

The Augustan age has been complacently dismissed as the age of "common sense," and it was precisely on that ground that Keats attacked it. But it does not take a very close study of that age to show that, whatever its general character, there was much in it that rejects this easy description,

and much that was as far from "common sense" as the most romantic could desire. The philosophy of Berkeley, for example, is hardly that which appeals to ordinary instincts: and even that of Hume, though deliberately clothed in the most simple and pedestrian of language, is really the most imaginative of poetry. Both Hume and Berkeley were opposed by Reid in the name of that very "common sense" which is regarded as the special mark of their age; and, while Berkeley and Hume wrote in Pope's lifetime, Reid did not write till Pope had been dead twenty years. There must have been *something*, then, in the Popian era which stood apart from its general trend: if indeed we have not, through the common illusion, mistaken its general trend altogether, and fancied that the ideas which have come down to us in its most conspicuous writings were the ideas that really ruled it. We cannot measure the domestic architecture of the Nile or the Euphrates by the Pyramids or the temple of Bel.

All then that we have said about the eighteenth century must be viewed in the light of these considerations, and must be read with that *peut-être* which Renan wished his readers to add mentally to every paragraph of the *Vie de Jésus*. "To be entirely just in our estimate of other ages," says Froude, "is not difficult: it is impossible"; and the closest student can never be certain that he is not stressing the trivial or neglecting the important. We were, in that last chapter, writing generally; and every generalisation is more or less a falsification. We spoke, it will be remembered, of Dryden, for



example, as one who confined himself to plain and obvious things, avoiding lofty and transcendental flights or imaginative images: such being the spirit of the age, to which he desired, as a popular writer, to conform. But this is only partially true: there is a good deal of Platonism in Dryden. When he writes

From harmony, from heavenly harmony  
This universal frame began,

he was certainly not moving on the earth. Pope, again, when he closed the *Dunciad* with lines of almost Lucretian sublimity, was writing in a tone very different from that of the *Rape of the Lock*. Still more is this caution necessary when we speak of others who belong in date to the Popian epoch, but had an independent genius of their own. There is much in Thomson which, but for the stilted language, might belong to quite another century: and, amid the dreary imitative feeblenesses of Christopher Smart, the amazing *Song to David* reveals an inspiration that seems to come from another world altogether. Blair's *Grave*, and Young's *Night Thoughts* are, it is true, but the work of would-be poets, but in their intent, and in their occasional successes, they too belong, not to the Augustan school, but to one that flourished far later. And if we could know—which is impossible—the unspoken ideas of many of the silent multitude of readers, or scan the verses of the mute, inglorious Miltons of the time, we might very well find that they were not always in sympathy with the tone which, in the published works, has been preserved

to us. An age, it cannot be too often repeated, need not be fully represented by its writers; and we must beware of seeking its true voice in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire.

This being borne in mind, we shall be ready to see, even in the Popian age, the preparation for the age that was to displace it and despise it. The children that revolt against their parents often inherit from them the very spirit of revolt, and draw from them the ideas that inspire the rebellion: and Wordsworth and Coleridge, though they fancied they were making an entire break with the past, were really building upon it. They were like Job, who, when combating the theories of the ancient men "to whom alone the land was given, and no stranger passed through it," was in actual fact but carrying those very theories to their logical issue, and refuting them out of themselves. Changes are always but developments; they are never complete severances.

One of the most marked changes, none the less important because it lies on the surface, is that of language. We must of course assume that a people knows what is the poetic diction for its own time better than its successors: and it is a very ignorant criticism which blames a poet for using the words which suit his own day, however inappropriate they may seem in ours. Any careful watcher of his own generation will notice how, often through the most trivial causes, a word loses one set of associations and assumes another. A casual parody, the accidental popularity of a music-hall phrase, the adoption by the "lower classes" of "upper-class" ways of speaking, the mere adequacy of a word,

involving its common use, these and a thousand other causes may degrade it from Miltonic sublimity to Whitechapel vulgarity. Spenser's phrase, "a lady gent," for instance, can hardly be read now without a smile; Milton's "no fear lest dinner cool," Pope's "clasped the blooming hero in her arms" call up a very different set of notions from what they once aroused; "an elegant female," which was dignified in the time of Scott, and high poetry in the time of Gray, has to be used very gingerly by poets in our time; Wordsworth's "pulse of the machine" strikes a strange note for us; and so on *ad infinitum*. But this is not all; almost every word has a different association for almost every man; and its mere *meaning* is perhaps the least important thing about it. Nay, as Tennyson observed, and as we all have noticed without Tennyson's help, you have only to *look* at any word, however stately, for five minutes, and it becomes bizarre: or an ignorant person may mispronounce it, and it is to you for ever ridiculous. "Touch it ne'er so lightly," *out of song* it breaks: and any song with that word in it loses its perfection. A slight change in the pronunciation of a word may spoil the most exquisite of rhymes. When *toil* was pronounced *tile* Gray could use it to rhyme with *smile* without provoking the very thing of which he spoke: to-day—or yesterday—the word *tile* is so ludicrous that we renounce the rhyme altogether.

All these changes go on remorselessly to deal random injury to many an exquisite gem of poetry—until in time the evil works its own pitiful remedy; the language becomes more or less dead, and all

associations, noble and ignoble, perish together. We read Virgil, and do not know, except on authority, when he is using the most dainty collocations, or when he is making one of his rare failures. We read Æschylus, and we do not feel the difference between one of the triumphs of his daring magniloquence and one of the disasters. We find in our dictionaries that a word is "poetical," and our candidates use it in their prize-compositions: but we cannot tell whether the poet "nodded" when he wrote it, whether it was ordinarily a poetical word, or whether, in the way great poets have, he contrived by a subtle turn to *make* it poetical for the time being. We *know*, by study, that *res* is a word of prose; and we *believe* that Virgil, in his ever-living line,

Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt,

compelled it to wear a pathos and a splendour which it had not before: but we cannot be sure; we do not feel it instantaneously as we do with a similar case in our own language, and we can never be certain that another poet, trying to gain the same effect, may not have calamitously missed it.

Thus the very time at which the diction of poets is likely to disturb its readers most is a generation or two after it was written, when its *meaning* is still quite familiar, but its *associations* have changed: when the company words keep has degenerated, but before the process of time has lent words and associations alike something of the glamour of the long past. The Augustans, for instance, were fretted by the Elizabethan diction; it was at once

too near them and too far off. To us it comes with all its grotesqueries worn off by three centuries; and we are doubtless often delighted by what was actually a lapse. Chaucer's language, again, to Pope's contemporaries, was nearly unintelligible, but just intelligible enough to be barbarous. We have learnt it afresh, and love it; for it is all touched with the mist of medievalism, and what may well have been prose has become poetry, as a knight—once no less commonplace than an alderman—has become the very type of the romantic. But Pope's own language, to Wordsworth and Coleridge, was close enough to be understood, and far enough off to be losing its original charm. It was to them what the language of Scott's heroines is to us—stilted, unnatural, and over-precise: they could not imagine how anyone could possibly use it who meant to tell the truth. Scores of poetasters had worked the life out of it; the very expressiveness of it had made men quote it until quotation had staled its vigour; certain of its phrases, once simple, had become pedantic; and the new school would have none of it. We to-day can see the same process beginning with much of Tennyson's dainty phraseology, the charm of which often lies in the avoidance of the banal; in steering his chariot so as *just* to miss the turning post. But such daintiness very soon becomes itself banal; and so it may well be ere long with the daintiest of present-day phrasemakers. So it was with Pope. By 1798 he had just outlived the lifetime usually given to words: they had lost their bloom, and had not yet gained their second beauty of decay; and it

was too much to expect that readers, *at that time*, should go through the imaginative stress of putting themselves back eighty years, to catch a charm which had vanished, and the sound of a tone that had become harsh. Certain it is that the two great revolutionaries made no such effort; they felt that the style did not suit *them*, and turned aside from it. Such was still its power, however, that even they, when not inspired, fell back into it; and the passages of Wordsworth and Coleridge which displease us are those in which, more or less unconsciously, they retained the "poetic diction" they had in intent discarded for ever.

And similarly with metre. A measure must not be too triumphant; it must not be too obviously capable of expressing what the poet desires to express. Otherwise it will be caught by a thousand imitators, and, in Cowper's words, become "a mechanic" trick: until satiety disgusts men with the masters as well as with the incompetent pupils, and until good and bad alike are thrown upon the scrap-heap. So it was with Tennyson's blank verse: its peculiar tone was very easily imitated by parodists and poetasters, until even Lowell, long before Tennyson's death, confessed himself "cloyed," and actually turned for relief to the hexameters and lyrics of Clough, a poet who was not excessively melodious. For a similar reason men tired of Mendelssohn, and asked for something stronger, even if less beautiful. One cannot wonder, then, that after a course of Whitehead, Pye, and Hayley, the men of 1790 should have resolved to have nothing more to do with the heroic couplet.

To the powerful influence of satiety were added others, still more powerful, all tending to dissatisfaction with the old, and all reaching out towards something new. Love of outdoor nature was demanding expression in poetry—a love to be traced in large measure, like so much else that is poetical, to causes very prosaic. So long as the Londoner, like John Gilpin, ventured as far as Edmonton but once in twenty years, one could hardly expect him to think much of the countryside. But when the roads began to be improved, and a stage-coach could actually run to Bath in ten hours, men began to care for the fields and woods, and to desire descriptions of them. Here again the beginnings, if not much more than the beginnings, are to be found in the age that was past. Thomson, Shenstone, Dyer, the two Wartons, Collins, even Goldsmith, had revealed a love of external nature very different from that shown in *Windsor Forest*; and Cowper's *love* of nature, if not his penetration into her, was as keen as Wordsworth's own. Gray, that man of universal mind, though he put little of his feelings into verse, was profoundly affected by the mystery and majesty of mountains; and even Johnson, to whom every return from a hilly journey was an escape, was moved by the Hebrides. It could not be long before the half-formed emotion would find the poet to give it the supreme expression.

Along with this went the discovery of the past. Gothic architecture—the beauty of which Gray, again, was one of the first to admire—the poetry of the Middle Ages, from which Percy had made a very inadequate selection, but which could not fail

to attract as soon as it was brought into notice; the so-called Ossian poetry; Norse literature, unveiled by Mallet and used by Gray; a very elementary, but growing and promising, conception of history; the study of English poetry by Warton—a pioneer work of epoch-making importance despite all its errors; the edition of Chaucer by Tyrwhitt; all these, and countless other influences, inevitably disturbed the complacent conviction that the old days were “barbarous” and the present “refined.” Men began to cast their eyes backward beyond the “civilised” centuries, and to wake to the fact that the English language had a past of splendour, and that English poetry had not begun with Waller or Cowley. Into all this, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Scott entered with the enthusiasm of youth. Wordsworth, who read all the poetry that he could beg or borrow from his friends, studied these old models; Coleridge imitated them in the *Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*; Scott not only imitated them, but collected the ballads of his native land and actually edited one of the early metrical romances. It was not possible for such men to rest content with the poetry that had satisfied their fathers. A whole new world had opened before them; they went forth, like Drake or Raleigh, in search of all the treasures it could yield; and they brought back the spoils of the Indies to enrich not themselves only but others also.

Upon all this came the vast flood of revolutionary feeling. How it captured Wordsworth and Coleridge they have told us in some of the greatest poems in the language; we know with what hopes they



welcomed it, with what eagerness they watched it, and with what sadness they saw it degenerate. The French upheaval, the greatest event of modern times, left nothing untouched, and altered the whole world from the Alleghanies to the Urals. Its effect on literature has been studied in scores of first-rate books, notably those by Dowden and Herford, and we can take it for granted that the reader either knows of it already, or would rather read of it there than here. But it was certainly immense: and, be it noticed, this immense literary effect was due to something not essentially literary at all. Whatever were the true causes of the Revolution—and probably they will never be fully known or duly balanced among themselves—they were political, social, financial: and the Revolution itself was a political, social, financial, and ultimately a military movement. Yet it stirred the literary world as certainly as the discovery of India stirred Camoens to write; and it played upon style as vigorously as the purely stylistic example of Johnson or Pope played upon the styles of the writers who followed them. We find, once more, taste varying in accordance with the result of a battle, and criticism waiting upon a vote in an assembly.

Once again, too, we observe how different the effect of the same event on one side of a strait and on the other. The *immediate* effect in France was to bring to birth a high-flown, stilted, Asiatic form of eloquence, as repulsive to us in England as it would have been to Voltaire in France: a style of which the *Carmagnoles* are only an extreme exemplar, and Barère only the worst exponent: full of pedantic

classical allusions—justly ridiculed by Canning and Frere—of big words for little things, of sham poetry where simple prose was requisite. Even Napoleon, the man of action, was captured by it; his favourite author was the bombastic “Ossian,” and his very despatches and proclamations, vigorous as they often are, are saved from the same fault—and not always saved—only by their brevity. In England, though it is true the eloquence of Burke became more florid under the influence of his anti-Revolutionary passion, and the speeches of Pitt read to-day as over-elaborated and pompous, yet the general tendency, perhaps by a reaction from the French influence, was in the direction of simplicity. We find thenceforward a gradual diminution in Johnsonian balance, and a greater lightness and ease of style. But the *total* result of the great event was not to be measured in terms of mere words or collocations of words: it is to be seen in the immense widening of ideas, in enthusiasms, hatreds, hopes, fears: in “exultations, agonies, and love, and man’s unconquerable mind.” Every thought took a wider sweep, every plan a more unlimited boldness, every dread was more keen, every adventure more daring. Of all the ideas of the Revolution the poets are far better representatives than the actors, who, with but a few amazing exceptions, were little men, with petty ambitions, selfish fears, slender grasp of mind. The real force lay in the great masses of undistinguished people; and to these mighty hosts the poets gave a vocal expression and a name. - Something of the Titanic recklessness of the Elizabethans seized once more on English poetry, but it was held

in leash by the still remaining prestige of the "classical" period that was past: and for the movement of their time the poets found an even more fitting language than those of the Armada time had found for theirs. Those who wish to realise the emotions of that time, the real meaning of the upheaval to the peoples, must look not to the statesmen and the soldiers, who often did not know either what they were defending or what they were opposing, but to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, who, almost alone among Englishmen of the age, could comprehend the length and breadth and depth and height. We must seek for the real deeds among the makers of words, and for real statesmanship not in the council-chamber but in the study. A dozen of Wordsworth's war-sonnets are worth the whole achievement of Liverpool's Cabinet, and a few pages of Shelley the whole achievement of Castlereagh.

If we may be allowed for once to disregard our own cautions against generalisation, we might venture to sum up the character of this new literature in the single word "enthusiasm." Here perhaps lies the marked difference between the romantic and the classical: the one endeavours to restrain excitement, the other allows it free play. No illustration is needed to show how the eighteenth century feared and avoided "enthusiasm," alike in literature and in life. When Bishop Lavington had dubbed the Methodists "enthusiasts," he fancied he had done enough to suppress them: and indeed for many of his readers the single word *was* enough. The tone of Gibbon's great work is decided by this one emotion—an emotion itself carefully controlled and

unfanatical—against fanaticism. His objection to early Christianity is less to Christianity itself than to the wildness and want of discipline which it fostered: men had no business to be so zealous either for or against any cause as the Fathers showed themselves to be. Anathemas were not merely signs of bigotry, but worse—proofs of vulgarity; and a haste to convert the world was inconsistent with the cultured acquiescence which a true philosopher ought to show. The same feeling is still more visible in Hume, who saw no reason why he should press his own views to the point of danger. Gray, too, though in other respects so free from slavery to prevailing fashions, was in this respect the child of his age: as Matthew Arnold complained, he “never spoke out.” Bolingbroke, Walpole, Middleton, Warburton, Burke in his earlier years, Chesterfield, Reid, all alike are marked by a dread of enthusiasm in others and a rigid curbing of it in themselves. Of all the great men of the time—religious leaders apart—Chatham alone permitted himself full freedom; and, though his force of personality carried him through at the moment, and drove his hearers along with him, yet, after time had given opportunity for reflection, men regarded him as too theatrical, and trusted more to the calm restrained reasoning of Mansfield. Even Wesley, though his preaching produced such immense excitement, was himself, both in delivery and in language, almost ostentatiously austere.

The same was the case with literature. Anything odd, anything that transgressed the limits imposed by gentlemanliness and common sense, was eschewed

and censured. Johnson, the dictator of criticism, invariably judges by such rules: he dislikes the Odes of Gray because they are too wild, and plainly prefers Pope, who never fails because he never flies too high, to Dryden, who takes risks, and sometimes pays the penalty. "Safety first," is his motto: and like Mansfield, he would rather be the Chief Justice with security than, like Pitt, chief minister with short glory and a long eclipse. As he hated the Americans because they did not show due "subordination," and Wilkes because he was turbulent, so he hated frenzy in literature, and disliked Macpherson not so much because he believed him a forger, as because he had forged verses that did not conform to rule.

Against all this the new generation furiously revolted: and yet, had the younger men but paused to consider, they would have seen that there was in the very age they despised much of the very enthusiasm they wished to see. Why else was enthusiasm so much feared unless it was *there*? Why did Johnson detest the oratory of Whitefield except because it was full of the extravagance he disliked? Why warn against "fanaticism" if there were no fanatics? Men do not trouble to take precautions against an evil that does not exist. At the very time when Gray was confessing that though he was religious he wished his religion to be reticent and unobtrusive, the Methodists were turning the world upside down, not without a certain amount of noise: and, while Gray was preaching moderation in all things, he was himself laying the foundations of a new and more outspoken literature, indulging

“enthusiasm” for mountain scenery, and going into placid raptures over Gothic cathedrals. While Johnson was ingeminating “subordination,” rebellion was in the air, and there were enough rebels to make it successful. When irregularity in poetry was being so severely censured, it is plain that irregularities must have been committed: and Ossian, the *Song to David*, Gray’s Odes, Collins’s poems, even some of the scenes in Goldsmith’s plays, remain to show us what they were. Some men of the orthodox gradually drew to the heretic side; and Burke, whose imitation of Bolingbroke was more unadorned than Bolingbroke himself, burst out at past sixty into torrents of unrestrained eloquence, which Philip Francis told him were overdone and unbecoming.

But the new generation, as usual, failed to notice any but the most obvious features of the old; looking to the rock, they refused to see that they themselves had been hewn from it. As the French revolutionaries fancied that they were making a complete breach with the past, and, ignoring the years that had gone before, started with a new Year One, so the young men of 1798 imagined they were inaugurating an entirely new era: an era in which passion should be allowed its full sway, and “enthusiasm,” so far from being condemned, should be welcomed. And, though it was long before the two leading revolutionaries gained a hearing, the movement, being in the very breath of the time, spread like a new religion—because the world was ready for it. Scott, a Tory in politics, was long the most popular of the literary innovators; Byron, who

always maintained that the old was better, could not help writing in the new fashion, with a force that carried all before it: and, though many of the critics still upheld the classical traditions, they had in time to give way, and, as is often the case, welcomed the fashion just when it was beginning to go out. The great triumph of Wordsworth did not come till 1839, when the school he had taught was beginning to yield place, in its turn, to another. It came, like Chesterfield's recognition of Johnson, when "he was indifferent, and could not enjoy it; when he was solitary and could not impart it; when he was known, and did not want it."

Many of the original writers of this school were themselves critics, like Coleridge, Lamb, and De Quincey: others, like Hazlitt, wrote criticism that was itself literature. All of them show a vastly wider sweep than their predecessors, and penetrate far more deeply into the philosophy of composition. Some, like Carlyle, though never critics in the true sense, yet *feel*, and make strenuous efforts to find philosophic grounds for their feelings. But in every case we can perceive, or at any rate guess with a certain plausibility, the real causes of their holding this, that, or the other view. We should, for instance, have known beforehand what Carlyle, with his intense local patriotism, would think of his fellow-countryman Burns: his opinion is but a monstrous prejudice, which happens to be right; as his opinion of Scott is another prejudice that happens to be wrong. With Coleridge and Lamb the disturbing element is the enthusiasm of the discoverer. Coleridge, fancying truly or falsely that

he was the first that ever burst into the true sea of Shakespearian criticism, could see no fault in his idol; 'it is but recently that men have dared to enter a caveat against this indiscriminate eulogy. Lamb, poring over his old plays, the charm of which to him was largely that they *were* old, adored them the more the more they had been neglected. De Quincey, with his somewhat casuistical mind, and his tendency ever to distinguish, tended always not exactly to contradict an accepted opinion, but to correct it and split hairs about it. Hazlitt, in some respects the keenest mind of all, was splenetic, captious, and inclined like Jonah to think he did well when he was angry. And the whole age—to generalise once more—was moved by one gigantic prejudice. Happening to be at war with France, we found it impossible to read French literature with the old detachment, and began to discover faults in French poets that were invisible before the destruction of the Bastille. By that law of association which is the most certain of psychological laws, we disliked Voltaire and André Chénier because Napoleon was their accidental compatriot: precisely as, in the late war, men suddenly discovered that German science and scholarship were defective because von Tirpitz was a German. The converse was the case in 1814. As Germany was then so unaggressive that it was quite safe to hand the Rhine provinces over to Prussia, so German literature, hitherto ignored, began to be studied and admired: and thus the way was prepared for Coleridge, Carlyle, De Quincey, and Taylor to introduce us to Herder, Schiller, Richter, and



Goethe. It was a lucky accident—for these writers are certainly among the very greatest, and the enlargement they gave to our minds was incalculable—but it was an accident nevertheless. Had our antagonisms and alliances been different, our literary taste would have been different too. It will be remembered how, in 1914, many people began to study Russian; and gave it up as soon as they heard of the Peace of Brest.

But in very truth, if we are candid, we shall admit that almost all critical judgment, however skilfully disguised with the trappings of reasoning, is in the main built on prejudice: less flagrant, perhaps, than Carlyle's, and less violently expressed, but none the less real. Macaulay said of Burke that he adopted his opinions like a partisan, and defended them like a philosopher. This is true of us all, except that the philosophy is usually less visible than in Burke. We all approve or disapprove first, and find our reasons or excuses afterwards: and we approve or disapprove because of a series of events with which, often enough, æsthetics have nothing to do. According to our receptiveness or perversity we welcome a book because our fathers liked it, or despise it for that very reason. Should another book hit the taste of the age, we like it—if we are made that way; and we detest it if nature has made us too haughty or too eccentric to wish to go with the crowd. Those who prefer to be in the fashion admire because the rest admire: and those who prefer either to be or to seem independent contemn whatever the rest praise. Some are prone, like Phocion, to think that only nonsense can gain the

applause of the multitude. Others are naturally distrustful of "highbrows," and will therefore see no merit in a work praised by the select few. Some will not look at anything old; others, like Hazlitt and Rogers, as soon as they hear of a new book, straightway go and read an old one. All these conventionalities, imitations, whims, and fancies are imposed on us by our entanglement with an immemorial past, and are profoundly and inexplicably modified by a thousand currents from the myriad-minded present. We cannot, however, content ourselves with simply accepting them: man is an animal that likes to imagine that it thinks; and accordingly we seek for some reasoned justification of these prejudices, and fill the world with laboured demonstrations that they conform to some absolute standard of excellence. There is no such standard; or, if there is, it abides in some transcendental sphere which is far beyond our reach, and is of such a remarkable nature that the most contradictory opinions can be to the satisfaction of each individual thinker, proved to conform to it: it is like the Bible, from which warring orthodoxies and heresies can be deduced with apparently equal logical cogency. There is no sure and tangible criterion of beauty; nothing to which we can cling and say: "This at least is good, and that at any rate is bad." When Wordsworth said to a Byronic enthusiast "If I had time, I think I could make you see that Byron's poetry is over-rated," he would, had he paused to think, have seen that for *time* he ought to have said *eternity*.

But we do not convince even ourselves for long.

The smallest change in circumstances, a slight chill, an illness or a recovery, a paragraph in a newspaper, an upheaval in China, a cricket-match across the road, a quotation of our favourite passage by a man we despise, and all is altered. A cloud no bigger than a human hand appears on the horizon, and in an hour or two the whole sky is changed, and with it our critical judgment. Only one thing remains rocklike and immovable, like Athanasius against the world; and that is, our fixed conviction that the judgments we happen to hold at the moment are infallible and irrefragable.

## VII

### THE VICTORIANS

It is no part of our purpose to sketch, however briefly, the history of the half-century in which, probably, a greater and more lasting progress was made than in any half-millennium before it—progress in invention, in theoretical knowledge, in humanitarianism, and in the width, if not the depth, of literature. The progress, too, was of such a kind that, itself moving at a constantly accelerating rate, it made future progress likely to be still more rapid than itself: and in that age began the system of combining scholars, thinkers, and observers into associations, which, working on an organised plan, were likely to reach far more momentous results than the greatest geniuses of the past, working alone, could ever achieve. Thus, even if we maintain that the age produced no Leonardos or Harveys, yet in the total effect the Victorian investigators were far more uniformly successful than their most highly endowed predecessors. Not that, in actual fact, there was any lack of individual genius: to speak only of our own countrymen, the names of Darwin, Clerk Maxwell, Kelvin, and many others, will assuredly rank but little below that of Newton himself. Along with this, the introduction of free education

multiplied largely the numbers from which men of capacity might be drawn; and the abolition of religious tests at the older universities, the foundation of many new universities all over the country, and the vast improvement in the science and practice of teaching, were of incalculable benefit to the nation.

In mechanical invention, even those who most detest machinery can hardly deny that the age accomplished more than all previous ages put together: in every mechanical art the difference between the beginning of the Victorian era and the end is as startling as that between the *Temeraire* and a modern Dreadnought, or between Montgolfier's balloon and an aeroplane. It cannot escape notice that those who most depreciate machinery are quite willing to avail themselves of it. The philosopher, about to lecture on the luxury and materialism of the age, mounts a motor-car and, lounging on the comfortable cushions, is driven swiftly and pleasantly to his destination; and his eloquent denunciations are broadcast or distributed still more mechanically by the printing-press. Ruskin was never tired of fulminating against steam; but he went by steamer from Dover to Calais, and from Calais to Venice by rail.

Part and parcel of this mechanical invention was geographical discovery, which went on even faster than in the age of Elizabeth, and had results as far-reaching as the discoveries of Columbus and Vasco da Gama. A map of Central Africa in 1840 was filled up with elephants and giraffes, and one of Central Australia with more or less athletic kangaroos. By 1901 all these vast regions were known and charted; within a few years both Poles were

crossed, and Tibet itself explored; until now only Everest remains unscaled, and even the depths of the ocean are not wholly unscanned.

Social and political advance is less easy to appraise: progress to one man is retrogression to another. It is well known that Karl Marx, looking at this period from the point of view of the proletariat, gave it as his reasoned opinion that it was the most hateful in the history of the world: a view very different from that of a Roebuck or a Macaulay. "The judgment of history," whatever that may be worth, must be left to decide so difficult a question: and the judgments of successive historians must be left to deal with those of their predecessors. But it is probable that medical statistics, death-rates, and disease averages, will show pretty conclusively that even in this respect the Victorian age was better, and enormously better, than those which went before, and that Roebuck, however much he exaggerated, was nearer the truth than Marx.

In the arts of painting and sculpture, it may be that the age showed a decline; nor, despite the Albert Memorial, would most people think its architecture as beautiful as that of the thirteenth century, though it may have been an improvement on that of the eighteenth. In music, where taste is exceptionally capricious, a decision is still harder to reach; but it is probable that, at least in Germany, there was an immense growth in profundity, width, and passion between the death of Mozart and the time of Strauss. Hardest of all, perhaps, is it to measure literature with justice: and to discuss the literature of our own country during the Victorian age,

in its relation to contemporary circumstances, will be our task in this chapter: a task, as will be gathered from what we have said already, in which success is impossible, and in which it will be no small feat if we can avoid dogmatism and conspicuous error.

The two great representative poetical names of this period are Tennyson and Browning. Tennyson's literary father is Keats; his political mother is the Reform Bill of 1832. He was, of course, not uninfluenced by Wordsworth, but his sense of fitness was fretted by the incongruities, the alternate baldness and false elaboration, the besetting prosiness of Wordsworth's style; and he would seem to have set himself the special task of avoiding Wordsworth's faults. Not content with "uttering nothing base," he would utter nothing prosaic; and everything he published should be melodious, graceful, and verbally perfect. If anything below this standard escaped him in the first edition, he cut it out in the second; and his very over-sensitiveness to criticism—another feature in which he was the opposite of Wordsworth—helped him in his task. But he learnt from Wordsworth a deeper love of nature even than he had possessed from birth; a sense that poetry should teach—though he took warning from the *Excursion* and determined that the teaching should be indirect—and a realisation that philosophy is not the enemy of poetry but in truth the very thing that saves her from mere prettiness and vagueness. On the other hand, he was as profoundly convinced as Keats himself that poetry must have sensuous beauty, and verbal melody. While not going so far as to argue that "beauty is truth, truth

beauty," he was sure that beauty is truth's almost inseparable handmaid, and that truth alone will be slow to make its way into the minds of men. He held that Wordsworth had failed by being too exclusively truthful, and that Shelley had failed by being too vaguely lovely: while, if but a little more philosophy could be added to Keats, the ideal poet might be presented to the world.

The great change of 1832 installed the middle classes in power, inaugurated a long series of reforms, and exactly suited Tennyson. There had been nothing of the "red fool-fury of the Seine" about it; it had not touched property; it had left the lower classes in their place; and it had certainly coincided with, if not caused, a remarkable growth in material prosperity. For some years, it is true, Tennyson had not been allowed much share in that prosperity; but he had never been in painful want; and before he reached middle age the well-to-do public showed itself quite willing to purchase his poems at a fair price. He made, indeed, more money, directly out of poetry, than any man before or since; and, though his disposition was not naturally cheery, he could not help approving of a social system which did so well for him. This is not to insinuate that he was of a specially selfish or grasping character: it is almost inevitable, human nature being what it is, that we should approve of conditions that suit us, and dread changes that may affect our own interests. In any case so it was with him. He was also well endowed with that benevolence which informed many of the best men of the time: the benevolence which was constantly



praised by the judges as they sentenced revolvers to transportation, but which was regarded by some eccentrics as a kind of insurance against revolution and by others as a direct incentive to pauperism: the kind-heartedness which bestows alms on the beggars who make their woes conspicuous, and which throws open parks once a year to such tenants as do not poach, and show proper respect for a landlord. There is no hypocrisy in such a feeling; we all know, still, men of the most undoubted goodness who hold precisely such views and act upon them. When Baron Alderson told the "Captain Swing" agitators that, if they had not enough to eat they should appeal to the well-known generosity of the great men who had enclosed the lands and deprived the cotters of their wood and pasturage, he was not hypocritical: it was the fixed conviction of the times that God had made the many poor and the few rich, and that the poor ought to recognise that, hard as it might seem for them, they were playing a necessary part in a marvellous Providential scheme. The foundation-stone of the social edifice must not complain because it is not the cupola. And what amenities there were! The factory-owner was often the personal friend and paternal adviser of his workers—few of whom indeed survived long enough to make the paternal relation appear ridiculous—and Sir Walter Vivian, his position being still undisputed, could afford to unbend on occasion.

Tennyson was never tired of celebrating the special English "virtue," the abhorrence of "raw haste, half-sister to delay," the wisely fashioned Constitution by which "freedom slowly broadens

down from precedent to precedent": early in his career he sang of the land which, with all its mists, he preferred to all others because it had been chosen by sober-suited Liberty: and almost at the end he wrote to a Prime Minister—driven to deal with an evil only just in time—"not to be precipitate in his act."

This feeling made him too often but a vulgar patriot, the mere putter into fine language of a nation's baser emotions. His belated song of triumph over Napoleon is a Jingo glorification of England; the one weakness of the Ode on Wellington is its insular spirit; and when a crisis arose, there is no sign that he took a broader view than that of the ordinary man in the street.

A small war usually sickens people of fighting for one generation, a great one for two. At the end of the Napoleonic struggle men felt there must never be another, and the memory of those horrors was such that it actually kept Europe in tolerable peace for forty years. But when the quarrel with Russia arose, and national frenzy, skilfully fostered by newspapers and interested diplomats, loudly demanded war over a question too trifling to be worth the bones of a single British grenadier, and too complicated to be understood by any but the most highly trained publicists—the people once more found Tennyson expressing what they were pleased to call their minds. In what is in other respects one of his best poems, the "monodrama" of *Maud*, he glorified war not merely in that special case, but as the proper and regular remedy for the "canker of peace"; for, in fact, that very industrialism of which hitherto he had been the

chosen laureate. It is true that he entered a caveat against being assumed to hold all the views of his "monodramatic" and monomaniac hero: but every word of his own, written about that time, proves that he neither doubted the justice of the Crimean war, nor held more enlightened views as to war generally than the mass of his readers.

It is this that made Tennyson so admirable a Laureate. He was, indeed, what Burke bitterly called Pitt, "the sublime of mediocrity": he held the views of everybody, and expressed them as everybody would have liked to express them had he been able. The strange worship of the Queen found in him an accomplished high-priest with an admirable intonation; any event that interested the people received competent interpretation at his hands. He has been accused of half-and-halfness, but this very quality endeared him to the English love of compromise.

It would be unjust, however, not to notice certain loftier aspects of Tennyson's mind. He was quick to feel intellectual changes of atmosphere, and, though with too great caution, he gave to these breezes a probably imperishable voice. Doubt was beginning, timidly and hesitatingly, to intrude into British homes: German speculations were beginning to penetrate across the Channel: science was actually venturing to touch the Mosaic Ark of the Covenant, and geologists like Lyell were whispering conjectures about the seven days of creation: Darwin had not yet published the *Origin of Species*, but Lamarck's cruder guesses were being read, and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges* had popularised the

question and the attempted solution; even ministers of religion had declared their conviction 'that the Deluge was not universal. On the other hand, the Oxford Movement, the start of which is generally associated with Keble's University Sermon of 1833, had attracted a different order of minds; while, in yet another direction, the Broad Church school, which owned a loose allegiance to the philosophy of Coleridge, was exerting a strong influence, and was about to take its share in the work of social reform. To all these gales of thought Tennyson was astonishingly alive. He was a close student of Chambers's work, an intimate friend of the Broad Church leader Maurice, and later an equally intimate friend of the "most generous of all Ultramontanes," William George Ward. The less orthodox could find their views admirably put in the *Higher Pantheism*, in which, nevertheless, the most sensitive churchgoer could discern little to shock him: for Tennyson was always careful to "leave his sister when she prayed." But his chief work, in this regard, is one in which all the speculations of the time are inextricably interwoven with some of the purest and highest of poetry. No poem ever written is a more sensitive barometer of the philosophic and religious weather of the time at which it was written than *In Memoriam*, in which, beneath the admirable expression and often exquisite imagery, it is easy to trace the ideas which men like Emerson and William Ellery Channing were uttering in prose, and which, more or less inarticulately, thousands of ordinary men were formulating for themselves. Thoughts on the mystery of death, on the apparent

heedlessness of nature, on the possibility of a soul within the universe, on our hopes of immortality and of a final restoration, are blended with the personal sense of an all but irreparable loss so marvellously that the most callous must be stirred to emotion and the most cynical to admiration. As for the impression made on the higher minds of the time, it is sufficient to mention the name of Robertson of Brighton, to whom *In Memoriam* was the most precious gift ever offered to the world by an English poet. Not till later did men begin to wonder whether the philosophy was consistent with itself, or, if consistent, defensible as a whole. And even now, though it has naturally lost some of its appeal, it is safe to say that it is not likely ever to be utterly forgotten.

Among the marks of this age two allied features can hardly fail to attract the notice of modern students, and they are among the least pleasant. On the first there is no need to dwell; it has been brought prominently before us in the well-known book of Mr Strachey: the curious, somewhat priggish, self-satisfied type of the English gentleman; the type which Tennyson found exemplified without abuse in his friend Hallam, and at least professed to find in the Prince Consort. There is a certain priggishness in the noble and manly character of Arnold of Rugby, and a certain consciousness somewhat mars the philanthropy of Shaftesbury. For this type of character Tennyson had an unbounded admiration: this earnestness, respectability, and piety, thoroughly conscious that it was not as other men are, and, even when it forgave, forgiving in a

superior manner, seems to have been his ideal. Few people at that time appear to have realised, as most people do to-day, that there is a potential criminal in us all, and that it is but "handy-dandy" between the judge and the thief. At any rate, Tennyson drew for us, without visible misgiving, such a character in his King Arthur, which reaches its height of lofty perfection in *Guinevere*. To most of us nowadays this picture is all but intolerable: and we feel that if this is "the highest," the less we see of it the better. But no such feeling was apparent at the time. I have read a criticism in which, on account of the very scene of Arthur's forgiveness of the erring Queen, the Idyll is pronounced the highest achievement of all poetry; and it is noteworthy that the manly and sensible Macaulay, seeing it in proof just before his death, said, "I like it extremely; notwithstanding some faults, extremely." It is true that Morris's *Defence of Guenevere*, in which a very different conception is presented, appeared just before: but the day of Morris and Swinburne was not yet. It is clear that here again Tennyson was at once the teacher and the pupil of his age.

Closely connected with this is a certain sentimentality very conspicuous in Dickens, and visible even in Thackeray. Of this, in earlier days, Tennyson gave his readers full measure, pressed down and running over. The *May Queen* was for many years by far his most popular poem; as popular, in fact, as Dickens's Little Nell or Paul Dombey: and the *May Queen* is not the only poem in which a similar character is manifest. It was

not, I believe, for thirty years that people turned away from it: and the first public expression of distaste, if I am not mistaken, was as late as Justin M'Carthy's *History of our own Time*. It shows Tennyson's acute sensitiveness to the tone of his age that, in later days, he suppressed such sentimentality entirely. He did not, it is true, send the *May Queen* and *Guinevere* to join the *Skipping Rope*; but when, after 1870, he tried pathos, he achieved (to our minds) a vastly greater effect either by mingling emotion with humour or by the overpowering *direct* appeal of such poems as *Rizpah*. The time for gush had gone by, and Tennyson knew it. No wonder that no poet has ever kept his hold longer or more firmly than he.

Lastly, he showed exactly the right attitude towards woman; so long as they kept their proper place he would be chivalrous toward them. For their incipient aspirations after a fuller life he had an amused contempt; in the *Princess* he peeps for a moment into their real minds, and then turns away. Hence his pictures of "good" women are as insipid as those of Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray; independence, strength, knowledge and the zeal for knowledge, such as many women were beginning to show, were unintelligible to him: and his women's realm never rises above the level of a suburban croquet-lawn. No woman, Queen Victoria excepted, must surpass the Periclean limits. Tennyson could not teach his generation what they did not half-know already: and that is why his generation listened to his teachings, without revolt, for forty years.

When we turn to Browning, our chief interest, at the present moment, is less in the poetry itself than in the reception it had at various times, and in the judgments passed on it by his contemporaries. He is, in one respect, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who had no difficulty whatever in becoming known, though it was long before they became popular. Browning also, partly through his striking personality, partly through his association with notable men, partly through his romantic marriage with a woman who at the time was far better known than himself, was known *of* from his earliest days, and a distinguished author for the very reason that his works were not read. Few authors with enormous circulations are as famous as was Browning for having written the unreadable *Sordello*. This kind of reputation is a great good fortune for a writer, and possibly often far more advantageous than an instant and tangible success. He is certain that his works will receive attention; and it is better for a poet to be noticed with bewilderment, like Meredith, or with ridicule, like Wordsworth, than to endure the depression of being entirely ignored. And such a reputation commits a man to nothing: he is not expected to work out to exhaustion the vein in which he first achieved distinction, nor, on the other hand, need he desert his natural groove in order to retain the favour of a fickle populace. He has, in fact, much of the encouragement that comes from recognition with few of its drawbacks: he is briefless, but he is not the barrister who must always conduct a certain kind of case because he once succeeded in it. Assuredly no author was ever



more independent than Browning. As he said himself, he "had laboured *for* the British public," but not to please them; and he was "careless whether whoso read praised or not." He wrote to satisfy his own impulse, and sometimes even merely to gratify a whim; but it was always with the notice to his public that they might take it or leave it. It might seem, then, that he, if no other, was unaffected by the world around him, and that his poetry was born from him alone, like Pallas from Zeus, owning no other parent. It is all the more incumbent on us to consider whether even he was quite as independent as he imagined, whether the "British public that liked him not" did not contribute more than he thought both to his manner and to his substance, and whether the taste that finally accepted him and even overpraised him did not largely spring from influences totally outside the literary sphere.

And first be it noticed that he too began with imitation, and gave us "Shelley plain" in his first poem. *Pauline* is confessedly Shelley all over; and Shelley, when it was written, was just beginning to come by his own. It was almost at this very time that the famous debate between the "Unions" of Oxford and Cambridge was held, in which the Cambridge orators maintained the paradoxical position that Shelley was a greater poet than Byron: a few years later, Disraeli's *Venetia* showed that it was possible for a writer to disregard the old idea that Shelley was but a disreputable and half-lunatic reprobate; and two years later still Mrs Shelley's collected edition of the Poetical Works actu-

ally gained a popular success. Browning was only a little before his age in making Shelley his model.

The succeeding works, *Paracelsus*, *Strafford*, and the other plays, were, if their difficulty be considered, remarkably successful: and they gained for Browning the esteem of the more intellectual readers and critics. But it would seem that he did not reach the ear of the larger public until the intense interest aroused by the Italian revolution had drawn attention to the poet who truly said, "Open my heart, and you will see graven inside of it, Italy." Never has a nation, not actually at war, watched with keener enthusiasm the fate of another country than did the people of England watch the fate of Italy between 1848 and 1861: and both Browning and his wife were watching the movement from "Casa Guidi Windows," and writing of it to the British public. "Napoleon III in Italy," "Victor Emanuel enters Florence," "Garibaldi," these were a few of Mrs Browning's last poems; and they came to her countrymen consecrated and glorified by her death. There was about them a glamour as if from another world; and she, already known as one of the greatest of women, seemed as though she had died a martyr in the sacred cause. It was impossible that her husband—greater than she, but not yet known to be so—should not gain some reflected splendour from her and from her tragedy: and it was at this moment that the general reader discerned that he had already given us priceless treasures in *Men and Women* and *Pippa Passes*, and waited eagerly for what he might yet have to give. Three years after her death, he did give the world,

in *Dramatis Personæ*, another treasure of immense worth; and, three or four years later still, a work quite unique, and, if of varying value, yet as a whole "for deep draught and bulk unprizeable"—the *Ring and the Book*. But it is tolerably certain that if these had appeared a dozen years earlier they would have attracted but little notice: the taste that approved of them had to be created by the ignorant Thousand of Garibaldi and the skilful diplomacy of Cavour. After the *Ring and the Book* he produced little of comparable merit: but everything he wrote was welcomed, and even the rhymes of *Pacchiarotto* were praised. How far all this admiration was mere pretence, no one can tell, nor does it make much difference: for taste follows fashion, and, beginning with affectation and mimicry, ends in something that cannot be distinguished from sincerity. All human motives are mixed; there goes some villainy to every good action; and in all our best judgments there is mingled some foppery, some herd-instinct, some perversity.

As Browning was never so popular as Tennyson, so he never provoked anything like the same antagonism. For it must not be forgotten that the Victorian age was by no means exclusively "Victorian"; no great epoch can ever be summed up in a phrase, and where millions of people are concerned all possible forms of character, and all sorts of opinions, will be represented. Very early there were plenty of heretics who refused to worship in the Laureate shrine, and as time went on there were more. Matthew Arnold, who was but a dozen years younger than Tennyson, was certainly never

an uncompromising admirer: and much of his own poetry was inspired by a half-felt revulsion against Tennysonianism. In a famous passage, he contrasted the *simplicité* of *Michael* with the *simplesse* of *Dora*; much to the disadvantage of the latter. It is to be feared, too, that this revulsion was not merely against Tennyson's style, but against his whole attitude toward life, and that, if Arnold had spoken out, he would have classed the Laureate among the Philistines. For Arnold was not built to be satisfied with anything but himself, and the complacency of Tennyson, like the "Victorian" complacency generally, annoyed him. He did not, however, venture to speak out; and the result was that his half-uttered censures had the appearance rather of jealous carpings than of serious criticism. That many others felt as he did is, however, certain: but the feeling, especially toward the end of Tennyson's life, was, to repeat an illustration, like that of the Liberals in Palmerston's last Parliament, "Let the old horse drag the coach till the end; *afterwards*——?" Or perhaps one may say that they were willing to accept Tennyson as the official monarch of poetry: he was the recognised and chartered head, decent, like his own Telemachus, to perform the appointed ceremonial offices; but the real work was done by some Prime Minister. As a President of the Academy must be a good speaker, a good chairman at an annual meeting, and of a dignified presence, but need not be more than a respectable artist, so many people regarded Tennyson as a thoroughly suitable President of the Academy of poetry, the right man to receive a

peerage, and the right man to voice the thoughts of the country on great occasions; but whether he was actually the best *poet*—*that* was quite another question. Men who held these views did not speak out their feelings loudly, but they held them nevertheless, and these quietly-held opinions prepared the way for the more visible reaction that was coming.

Some, indeed, to use a vulgarism, "made no bones about it"; and the leader of these was Swinburne, one of the chief of whose ruling impulses was to write melodiously, but with a melody as unlike Tennyson's as possible, and another to do his utmost to shock Tennysonian respectability. So far from preaching the doctrine of a "sober-suited" England, and a detestation of the "fool-fury" of the Seine, Swinburne acclaimed revolution, and lost no opportunity of glorifying Republicanism and rebellion, Victor Hugo, and Giuseppe Mazzini. Partially, no doubt, this was a pose: but it was a pose that sprang naturally from reaction against the smug conventionality of which, in Swinburne's mind, Tennyson was the sublimated representative. If Tennyson set up "King Arthur as a modern gentleman," Swinburne would idolise Lancelot and Tristram; and to *Galabad* and the *Holy Grail* he would oppose the *Garden of Proserpine* and *Laus Veneris*. Less blatantly, Edward FitzGerald regretted the tendency of his old friend, and said plainly that "Alfred" had, in every one of his later poems, belied the promise of the volume of 1842. Morris and Rossetti *said* little, but their poetry was a silent protest against the Tennysonian influence; and Thomas Hardy, whose poems, though

not published till long after Tennyson's death, were largely written before, was obviously determined not to write a single one which could possibly be suspected, by the very dullest, of being indebted in the slightest degree to Tennyson's example. It would almost seem as if he revised his poems with the special purpose of cutting out everything that looked Tennysonian.

There was thus, to any who had eyes to see, much during Tennyson's own lifetime to forebode the coming reaction; and even the flood of eulogy which came immediately after his death did not entirely disguise the underlying feeling. How far this sentiment was due to real detached judgment must be left doubtful. There is a swing of the pendulum in criticism as in politics, and a tendency to change our rulers solely because we think they have reigned long enough: and probably this is one of the very strongest motives that stir human nature. It is not merely our vulgar that ostracise Aristides because they are tired of hearing him called the Just: all, from the highest to the lowest, are the slaves of this impulse, and cannot help, when they have admired for a good while, running perhaps a little too far in depreciation. And, as it is, to the credit of our nature, often the best that receive unbounded praise, so it is the best that have to suffer under unpopularity and faultfinding. There is no reason for thinking that the opponents of Tennyson were in the least more right, in an "absolute" sense, than his supporters: and already there are signs that doubt is arising as to the competence of the doubters.

## CONCLUSION

I HAD intended to write more chapters, dealing with my main theme as illustrated by the "Nineties," the early Georgians, and the Modernists: but, knowing the ferocity of present-day writers, I have decided to confine myself to those who are safely dead. I have no wish to meet the fate of the ancient Canaanites, and to be assailed not only by the Chosen People but by swarms of hornets. Nor is there any reason to think that the multiplication of examples would materially strengthen my thesis: and, however long I made my book, I should still have to omit whole schools and wide dominions.

Little then need be added, except to sum up the conclusions to which we have been led by our brief survey of literary history. That there are no permanent or established principles in criticism is the one thing that emerges from such a survey: the one thing certain is that there is no certainty. We might venture, in a bold moment, to assert that clearness and simplicity are the essentials of a good style: but we remember that no writer is more obscure than Shakespeare, and none less simple than Burke or Sir Thomas Browne. If we ask for grammatical accuracy, we rule out Froude, Thackeray, and practically all the Elizabethans. There are peoples, like most of the Orientals, that prefer

gorgeousness and magnificence; others, like ourselves at certain epochs, and the Chinese at all epochs, that prefer a plainness bordering on baldness. Some, like the Greeks, sacrifice logical grammar to the sense; others, like the Latins, are almost rigidly logical in their syntax. Goodness being a relative term, it is vain to call a thing good without saying what it is good for: and in the case of a book, two factors are to be considered, the writer and the readers. If meant for children, *Othello* is one of the worst works in existence, and vastly inferior to *Little Arthur's History*. As speeches to the wretched Commons of the time, Burke's declamations were often worse than those of Tommy Townshend; as pamphlets they were beyond praise. Everything must be considered with a view to its purpose: and many books are certainly not meant to please their reviewers. If a book satisfies a certain number of readers, it is so far good: it attains its end, and there is no other definition of goodness. Nay, if the only person satisfied is the author himself, *to that extent* it is a good book, whatever it be to others. We may, as a convenient brachylogy, call it bad: but all we mean, or ought to mean, is that it is bad *to us*. The phrase, it must never be forgotten, *is* a brachylogy, and needs expansion and qualification if it is to express anything like the full truth. We all know how books that once attracted us often cease to do so: *we* have changed, and the harmony between us and the book, which was necessary to make it good for us, has ceased to exist. The book, in an absolute sense, is as it was; but, one of the two factors that make a "phenomenal"



book having altered, its "goodness" has altered also.

And the same, on a larger scale, is the case with peoples and generations. Some people fancy that they can find an absolute standard in the judgment of vast periods and wide areas. Homer, they say, satisfies three thousand years and a hundred nations; he is, therefore, a model of literary merit. Shakespeare pleases Berlin as well as London; he is, therefore, a type of dramatic excellence. The test is as fallacious as any other. First, we know very little about the real opinion of these vast periods and wide areas; we guess in the dark. As, in social concerns, we are constantly finding individual Germans and Frenchmen very different from the conventional figures of popular fancy, so we may often conceive the literary standards of these nations quite differently from what they really are. At the best, we can but take a rough average, or attend to the loudest voices. The dissentients may be more numerous, but less noisy, or fewer, but more truly representative. Secondly, one is never sure that, even if an author is widely admired or despised, he is admired or despised by different people *for the same qualities*. It is likely, for example, that Shakespeare is more highly esteemed by Englishmen as a poet, and by Germans as a philosopher: and it is pretty certain that we to-day admire Homer for merits that did not so much appeal to the Greeks. Again, if the verdict of one generation reverses that of another, as is so frequently the case, who will decide between the two eras? A third generation often condemns both. Nor is there any

criterion by which we can test the difference between one nation's appraisal of an author and another's. The very fact that there *is* a difference shows that certain qualities appeal to one nation more than they do to the other; and there is no means of convincing either that the qualities it fails to appreciate are the higher.

The verdict of posterity, of which we hear so much, is a pure phantom, invented by unsuccessful authors to console themselves for contemporary neglect. When Southey looked to 1900 for the renown of his *History of Brazil*, he was looking to vacuity. To *which* of the thousand generations of posterity is a Euripides or a Tennyson to appeal? From A.D. 400 to 1000 Euripides seems to have driven Æschylus and Sophocles out of the field. In 1840 he was a botcher and a bungler: to-day, he stands, so far as we can judge, among the dozen greatest poets of the world. In 1950, for all we know, he may be a botcher and a bungler again. In the late eighteen-nineties, and early nineteen-hundreds, similarly, to a very prominent school Tennyson was beneath contempt; he is now, if we may judge by certain very visible signs, beginning timidly to regain repute; and he may, in the nineteen-fifties, sink once more. There is no such thing as a homogeneous "posterity": it is as confused and lawless as the chaos from which it springs. To repeat what we said above, its verdict is like that "judgment of history" to which statesmen profess to look forward for their vindication. There is no such thing as "history": there are only historians, and each decides according to his own bias.

From 1830 onwards the predominant English school of "history" was Liberal; and Cromwell, the American revolutionaries, and Charles Fox were the idols. Now, the opposite school is arising, and Charles I is eulogised, the Americans are dethroned, and Castlereagh, the bugbear of the Whigs, all but canonised. Such exceptions as there have been are easily accounted for. Those who worshipped Charles in the 'forties were the Tractarians; those who still detest Castlereagh are the Socialists, to whom Peterloo is more important than the Treaty of Vienna. That either school will last is extremely improbable; other schools will appear, and the pendulum will swing to and fro for ever. Nor will any of these schools be harmonious in itself: it will always be possible to confute the doctors out of the mouths of their nominal disciples.

Posterity, therefore, is a mere vague generality: and has the mark which Hegel was fond of ascribing to philosophical generalities. The widest of all terms, said Hegel, is Being; but it is the same as Nothing; it is "the night in which all cows are black." The future is a similar night, except that it will exhibit all colours in succession; it will be like the past, but longer, and therefore will show still more variety. Some, it is true, would vainly seek for a normal, colourless time, in which to find solid ground for their feet to rest upon. There is no normal time, and no impartial place. There are times calmer than others, and places far removed from London: but calm times are prejudiced by their very calmness, and distant places by their inevitable ignorance. How can a time of peace be

fair to the passions of war, or a Chinaman understand the *nuances* of English style and custom? The historian, sitting at ease in his study, "calmly" censures the tergiversations of Talleyrand in a time of revolution, or the errors of a general in the midst of the battle. The critic, above the *Sturm und Drang*, calmly blames the frenzy of Byron, or the vagaries of the Schiller of the *Robbers*. Where is he to find balances to weigh such passions? He may say that he is now far removed from the disturbing influences of Homer's time, and yet admires him; or that the *Bianchi* and *Neri* are dead, and yet he appreciates Dante: nay, that he sees both Homer and Dante more justly than their contemporaries. The idea is a delusion. He is but like a surgeon dissecting a corpse: he can analyse, name this nerve or muscle and that, and perhaps detect the disease of which the patient died; but he can never recall the dead to life. Through the veil of centuries he can see some things; but it may well be that, as with Luxor or Melrose, he is delighting in the ruin, and enjoying simply the beauty of decay. For all we can tell, what charms us may be something that has come into existence only since the poet died, and we may be admiring, for instance, because of a certain quaintness due to years, the very passages in Homer that were regarded as weaknesses in his time, as in all probability we feel a sympathy with Hector which the poet never meant us to feel; and a glance at the early commentators on Dante shows that they admired in him all sorts of things which to us are trivial. We have all heard scholars "enthusing" about the harmonies of Virgil or of a

Greek chorus: if they perceive any beauty at all, it is absolutely beyond question that it bears no resemblance whatever to the beauty felt by Virgil and Sophocles themselves. The rhythms are dead; a new rhythm has been invented; and *that*, by a natural hallucination, is supposed to be the same as the old. Who has not, in reading foreign verse, fancied to himself a melody, and enjoyed it, which, when he hears the lines recited by a native, he perceives is not in the verse at all? What consolation, then, could some unsuccessful Latin poet justly find from hoping that "posterity," two thousand years later, would approve of him? Even if he *is* approved of, the approval is based upon the wrong things, and felt in the wrong manner. The Helen we admire is not she that launched a thousand ships, but a deceitful ghost raised up by Mephistopheles: the glamour she has comes from the centuries that have passed since she died, and from our own imagination, which consents to be deluded.

Nor is it anything against a work that, having once been extolled, it is now disliked, or that, being admired in one country, it is viewed with indifference in another. A book *cannot* be written except for its author's contemporaries and compatriots. It is true that Milton wrote with an eye to the future, and that Macaulay, in composing his history, "had 2852 in mind"; but both Milton and Macaulay wrote in the dialect of their time, and, whatever they might fancy, were moved by the ideas of their country: and, as a matter of fact, no two books can be more easily dated from their contents than *Paradise Lost* and the *History of England*. If they

survive, it is by some quality *in their times* which is of permanent interest, or by some accident for which they were not responsible. "Immortality," in fact, which writers are fond of claiming for their works, is often a matter of the merest chance, and is no more a credit to the authors than the survival of their tombstones. Some poets are still known, and will probably always be known, because their works were so contemptible as to be thrown on to an Egyptian dust-heap, from whence they have been rescued by a band of Oxford explorers. Had they been popular, their books would have been thumbed till they dropped to pieces, and would have been forgotten. They are, in fact, remembered because they were thought worthless, as a half-ruined building is saved by the very dust that covers it. Remembrance does not prove greatness, and oblivion does not prove inferiority. The wind of fame, as Chaucer noticed long ago, bloweth where it listeth, and no one can tell whence it cometh or whither it bloweth. Some things are forgotten simply because they are alive; others, like Troy or Pompeii, are kept in memory because they were destroyed, and would hardly have been heard of had they lived.

Who can tell, in fact, what are the qualities which will interest other ages or distant countries? There are a thousand questions which, if we could raise Thucydides from the dead, we should like to ask him, but which, though he must have known all about them, he omitted to discuss as too trivial for "a possession for ever." By an extraordinary chance, his book *has* proved such a possession: but it would have been three times as valuable, and a

possession for *everybody*, if he had mentioned certain "unimportant" things. In Chaucer, there is a reference to Wade and his boat. Speght, the sixteenth-century editor, knew the tale: but did not tell it. "Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his straunge exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I pass it over." What would we not give to-day to know that tale? But how was Speght to guess that a time would come when *any* myth, however "fabulous," would attract the attention of myriads of scholars, and when travellers would seek El Dorado, not in search of gold, but in search of the most trifling tales the natives might have to tell of their gods and heroes? Sometimes a bit of literature has been suppressed for other reasons. We should like to know the full story of Cain, the exploits of the Nephilim mentioned in the sixth chapter of Genesis, the rest of the curious tale of Moses and Zipporah in Exodus, and scores of other facts which religious feeling has concealed from us for ever. How could the old priests who copied their Bible guess that men would wish to learn these heathen and heretic tales? Many and many a narrative that deserves to be immortal has perished because some few men did not care for it: as *Paradise Lost* only just escaped the "*ne imprimatur*" of the censor, and as Richardson's novels would have perished if Richardson's grandson had happened to own the copyright: or as the *Thebaid* and other old epics disappeared because, rightly or wrongly, certain judges decided they were not by the author of the *Iliad*. On the other hand, the book of *Ecclesiastes*,

which, if it does not express the universal feelings of mankind, expresses with astonishing exactness feelings which seem bound to *recur* at intervals throughout the whole of history, probably owes its survival to the lucky inspiration which made the author ascribe his thoughts to the great name of Solomon. Even so, it would appear that it attained admission to the Jewish Canon only with great difficulty and after a long time. A single adverse vote, or the omission of a single name in the work itself, might have deprived the world of it for ever.

Occasionally, the survival of a book is due to still more trivial causes. A great controversial treatise, for example, may kill its adversaries, and, like Samson, in doing so kill itself. It perishes because it has put an end to the dispute that gave it birth. Who reads Wallis's refutation of Hobbes's geometrical heresies? The refutation was too complete for the fame of its author. All the wit and wisdom of Pascal's *Provincial Letters* would not have saved it from oblivion: but the book had the good fortune to fail in its purpose; the Jesuits still survive, and the *Provincial Letters* survives with them. On the other hand, a great controversialist may sometimes confer on his adversaries an "immortality" which they could not earn for themselves. We have met booksellers who carefully preserve copies of Robert Montgomery's *Omnipresence of the Deity*, knowing that there will always be a few people who will want to read the poem in order to see whether Macaulay was quite just to it. In these days, when there is no end of the making of many theses for university doctorates, dissertations are constantly being written



on authors whose sole claim to remembrance is that previous thesis-writers have forgotten them: and no one can tell that by some lucky or brilliant thesis-writer, the dead author may not be galvanised into something like life again.

But even if immortality were an infallible test of the merit of a work of art, it is unfortunately a test not easy to apply. A critic, before using it, has first to live for ever himself, and then to ascertain that the work in question is still alive enough to be called immortal. A second eternity may well have passed before this task is finished. On the other hand, the death of a work may turn out to have been "greatly exaggerated," and even its "still-birth" may be no proof that it will not, by the irony of fate, revive and stand upon its feet. The driest bones often put on flesh, and not exclusively in prophetic vision. Scores of books have attracted no notice at their first publication, and yet have achieved fame when some accident has called attention to them. *Lorna Doone* is one case, *Precious Bane* another. Thomas Traherne does not appear to have startled his contemporaries: two centuries after his death Bertram Dobell unearths him from the dust of decay, just in time for one of his poems to gain a place in the fadeless pages of the *Oxford Book of Verse*. Of the thirteen thousand novels published in 1928, or the almost equally numerous volumes of verse issued by the authors at their own expense during the same time, is it impossible that as many as ten righteous may have slipped the notice of the angelic reviewers, and failed to escape like Lot to the mountain? They have perished

with the ignoble herd in the general overthrow: but is it impossible that when some excavator comes to dig among the ruins of the buried cities, he may light upon these overlooked masterpieces, and bring them to the notice of an admiring world? No one, in fact, however prominent, is sure of immortality, and no one, however retiring, can be sure of avoiding it.

The moral for the critic is obvious. He must deal less freely than is his wont in triumphant certainties and "absolute shalls." He must work out his declamations with fear and trembling, and ridicule must be tempered with self-love: for he can never be certain that he himself may not, in the long run, turn out to be the ridiculous party. Nothing is more absurd than laughter directed at the wrong target. Every one of his statements must be qualified with an express or tacit "as it seems to *me*," or rather, "as it seems to me at the present moment"; for few things are commoner than for a judge to change his mind: and the change may come in an instant and for the most trumpery reason. We all know people who admire Dickens in one edition and cannot endure him in another, or Carlyle in octavo but not in quarto: and we must all confess that we are not so vastly superior to these people as to dare to laugh at them. Some very eminent men have been set against Tennyson because he spells "passed" "past" or "*mêlée*" "mellay": and we know others who cannot read Bernard Shaw because he uses a colon where most men use a comma.

What was wrong with Jeffrey in his review of the

*Excursion* was not that he held a mistaken opinion. He said, "This will never do"; and that "never" was fatal. He really meant, "This does not do *for me now*"; and if he had said so much and no more none could justly have found fault with him. He had a right to his opinion: men cannot help it if they do not like a certain mass of blank verse. But he confounded his own dislike with a permanent and universal criterion; and there he was wrong, and a very few years proved him to be wrong. So far from "never doing," the *Excursion* has done very well for many readers; and a single satisfied reader is enough to upset Jeffrey's universal negative. His case is a warning, unfortunately not too often heeded. There are very few critics with half Jeffrey's credentials: his learning was great, his taste carefully formed on the "best" models, his abilities, both in width and in depth, exceptional; and, if ever anyone had the right to dogmatise and prophesy, he had that right. Yet he failed, and failed egregiously. One might have thought that an example, so conspicuous and so famous, would have had some deterring influence on succeeding generations. It has not been so. We find to-day not one or two critics but many, far less adequately equipped than he, and with his fate before them, who yet dogmatise and prophesy with even more confidence than his, and who, as if they were so many Olympian or Stygian deities, deal out slices of immortality to this writer, and doses of Lethe to that, in sublime unconsciousness that merit is not to be discerned by one man, and that, even if merit could be thus discerned, an "eternity

promised" by the most "ever-living" reviewer has a strange knack of taking its own course and following the paths of accident. The trump of Æolus blows "shrewéd fame" to those that may well have deserved good, good to those that have deserved bad, and often none at all to those that have the best right to expect a lasting renown.







